A "Forever Knight" Novel

LIZARDS IN THE GRASS

A 'Forever Knight' Story

by

Karen Miller

Dedicated to all those who pursue the life creative.

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A WORD FROM YOUR SPONSOR

She was brought across in 1994 ....

And it's all Mary GT Webber's fault, so you can blame her completely and entirely for the brick you now hold in your hands.

After Mary and I completed our War of the Worlds novel in 1990-whenever, I made a pact with myself that my fan writing days were over. Not because I was no longer a fan, but because my life is a crowded place to be and it was time to finish my Master's degree in Children's Literature (yes, I finished it, I graduated and next time I'll just fill in the Grand Canyon with a teaspoon -- it'd be easier) and get on with my professional writing life.

But the leap from writing light hearted young adult romance novels to full length fantasies is a large one ... and the chasm between them is filled with doubts and fears and refrigerators that really should be cleaned out right now.

Let me share a secret with you: just because you've been published once, or twice, or even thrice, as I have, there's no guarantee that you're going to be published again. And that, I have to tell you, is a really scary thought. Especially when in your heart of hearts you define yourself as a writer.

So in between struggling with the damn fantasy, and cleaning out the fridge, I had a look at this show about a vampire working as a homicide cop to make up for all the killing he's done.

Okay. Now for the big confession.

When Mary first told me about this show, I scoffed.

Yes. I did. *Mea culpa, mea culpa* and so forth.

Mary never could resist a challenge. She showed me the pilot two parter. I thought, well, it's okay. Nothing to write a 75,000 word novel about. I thought Schanke was endearing. I thought LaCroix made a neat villain and had, in fact, a perfectly valid point of view. I thought Geraint Wyn Davies overcame being blonde very well. And it was great to see Catherine Discher again.

Then Mary showed me *Feeding the Beast.*

Holy Haemoglobin, Batman! Where the hell did *that* come from?

Here was a show full of characters who didn't have their shit together. We were talking -- God forbid -- three dimensional situations without happy endings. We were talking neat philosophical stuff like redemption, and self acceptance. The struggle to be human. Taking what you want, and then paying for it. The nature of love. Betrayal, of oneself and others.

Loneliness, and isolation, and the burden of feeling oneself to be an outsider

Whoopeeeee !

I rediscovered my courage, writing this story. So I owe everyone connected with Forever Knight heartfelt thanks.

I also owe Mary, not least because she designed the layout, and did the cover. Guys, if you find a friend with whom you can be yourself, I mean really yourself, who is relentless in her (or his) dedication to your well being, who encourages and supports and challenges you, who is prepared to tell you when you've plucked your eyebrows too thin ... if you find a friend like this, as I have in Mary, then you are fortunate indeed. And maybe, as I am, a damned sight luckier than you deserve to be.

If this story has any merit it is largely because Mary edited it.

I would also like to thank Shayne and Belinda for their perspicacious comments, which helped to make this a better piece of writing. And Susan Garrett, whose work is exquisite, and who helped me get a handle on writing in this universe.

This story is set between first and second seasons. I hope you enjoy it. Write me reams of fulsome praise. Or a short note of condemnation. I don't mind which, but having dropped the stone into the well, it would be great to hear some echoes.

Karen

PS: This is the second edition. That means the formatting errors are all cleaned up. I hope. And a couple of inaccuracies born of not seeing Hunters and Dead Issue have now been taken care of. Thanks to Mary for heroism above and beyond, for helping to clean up the text. ..... Karen

A WORD FROM THE EDITOR

It was fun. Crazy, but fun. I've always liked Obstetrics. O.P.s of course -- Other People's. Delivering one's own wooly mammoths of manuscript is another matter entirely.

It's a *great* story. Dark. Intense. Sad. Funny. It was a joy to work with Karen, as always. Her crazy faith in me renews my hope for myself. My faith in her needs no stating -- it just is. My special thanks to Karyn Bradford, who is also a joy to play with, moved as she is by the vanishing spirit of "can do". Her sheer professionalism is just a pleasure to be around.

I had a great time. I'd do it again in a second. If only I had a second.

Mary G.T.

Though ye suppose all jeopardies are passed,

And all is done that ye looked for before,

Ware yet, I rede you, of Fortune's double cast,

For one false point she is wont to keep in store,

And under the skin oft festered is the sore:

That when ye think all danger for to pass

Ware of the lizard lieth lurking in the grass.

John Skelton, 1502

PROLOGUE

No cop ever really expects that one day, he's going to get shot. Not *really*. Not actually *shot*, with real bullets. That kind of shit happens to *other* cops, especially the ones south of the border in LA and New York. Doesn't happen in Toronto, no way Jose, and you can have *that* bit of information for free, Jack.

So when you do, and it turns out to be, you know, just a little flesh wound, you figure okay. That wasn't so bad. One night in hospital, a week behind a desk and that's you done. That's your lot. Your quota. You're safe as houses for the rest of your career 'cause, hey, lightning don't strike twice, hadn't you heard?

Sure, it's not beyond the bounds of possibility that you might, just *might*, cop a blast from a water pistol one day in the back yard in the middle of summer when your kid and every other guy's kid is playing in the red and white plastic paddle pool you bougt for $22.95 in K Mart. But that doesn't count.

One long, giggling squirt from a buck ninety five water pistol has absolutely nothing in common with, say, three rounds from a .38 special. When your eight, no, wait, make that nine, year old daughter smacks you fair and square dead centre in the chest with a steady handed accuracy some beat cops you know could wish for, you throw your hands up and stagger backwards, miming great shock and surprise. You clutch at the wet stain on the really nifty fluorescent floral shirt your wife bought you because she loves you, despite your lousy job and its lousy pay and its lousy hours, and you groan, 'Aaaagghhh, ya got me!" and sink theatrically to the short wet grass, eyes closed, still as beer in a hot mug. Then you listen for the thud of small feet on the warm ground, and the half-believing cry of 'Daddy?' and you wait till the last possible second before grabbing that wriggling, laughing armful of sweetness and crushing it to your chest, scrubbing your stubble gently against the rose petal cheeks so she knows, just in case she ever doubted it, that Daddy loves her, will always love her, no matter what.

On the other hand, when an eighteen year old punk hopped on shit or crack or whatever the hell else they're getting their jollies from these days hits the panic button 'cause the guy in the convenience store starts reaching for some alarm buzzer or a gun or maybe even the money, like he's been told to, when that eighteen year old punk squeezes the trigger like it's the first woman's tit he's ever laid finger to in his life, and smacks you fair and square through the guts with the hot lead you always figured would hit somebody else ... when that happens ...

Geez. You think you'd be safe buying jelly donuts, wouldn't you?

CHAPTER ONE

The sound of shots exploded Nick's woolgathering, catapulting him out of the Cadillac within the space of two mortal heartbeats. The convenience store's auto doors spat out a bolting figure: male, eighteen, caucasian, blond, five-eight, one forty, black and red tee, jeans, scuffed red hi-tops. The figure threw away something smallish and heavy that clanged against the rusting dumpster next to the store and clattered to the asphalt.

Nick ignored the kid and the gun, because shots had been fired and Schanke hadn't come out of the store. He ran for the door.

Blood. Blood everywhere. Iron and salt. Cloyingly sweet.

He staggered to a halt, one arm flung before him, and wasted precious seconds subduing the beast, who resented deprivation, hated *cow*, whose thirst could never be slaked even when allowed to plunder the richest vein of all, the red gold, the beautiful human blood ...

Schanke.

One look at the store attendant was enough. Nick turned away from the ruined face, the pulped throat, the blood, and saw the new shoes, the I-talian shoes, man, can you believe the workmanship in these shoes, man, hey no wonder the good ol' Land of the Maple Leaf's goin' down the john, we can't make shoes like this any more.

Schanke lay on his back between two rows of food, arms flung wide in disbelief. He stared at the flaky paint ceiling, fingers curled protectively about the packet of jelly donuts he'd decided he couldn't possibly live without if he was going to pull one more double shift this month.

Nick's hand fumbled for his phone, and he called it in. Officer down. Send in the cavalry. Start saying your prayers.

Schanke's fingers were twitching. He blinked twice, slowly. The front of his shockingly sedate blue shirt was sodden scarlet. The orange and lime striped tie was skewed under one ear, polka dotted red.

The beast roars, flexing ravenous, undernourished muscles. The blood is bright, and beckoning ...

One bullet had ploughed a furrow through the flesh over Schanke's ribs. A second had pierced his belly. The third was lodged in his right shoulder. Nick could hear his partner's heart stutter. Plunging to his knees beside him, he reached through a green and gold fog to check the pulse at the junction of throat and jaw. Blood seared his fingers and he hissed, recoiling.

On a gentle exhalation, Schanke said, "Myra ..."

Fingers crushed to his face, Nick willed the change to happen, willed the mask back in place.

"Knight ... 's that you?"

"Yes, it's me. Don't talk," said Nick, clearly, precisely,no soft sibilants for Schanke. "The ambulance is coming."

"Son of a bitch," said Schanke with perfect clarity.

Silence. In the distance a duet of sirens, crescendo.

"Schanke ..." The labouring heart still throbbed beneath its veneer of flesh, the stubborn, seductive blood flowed yet, but --- "Schanke!"

Schanke did not reply.

Nick wrenched Schanke's head back, fingers vice like on the nostrils. His other hand pried open the mouth, ensuring an unobstructed airway. Inhaling to bursting point he bent to exhale into Schanke's flaccid lungs.

The blood sings drink, drink. The beast howls, piteous in its plight, its purgatory of perpetual starvation. Poor beast, who knows only that it hungers, and is denied.

Nick howled into Schanke's imprisoned mouth. The bloody chest rose, fell, and was still. Trembling on the brink of anarchy, fingers slippery, mouth smeared scarlet, Nick exhaled again, and again.

Then a hand pressed his shoulder and an unknown voice said, "Right, pal, we'll take it from here, okay?"

There were people in the store. Red and blue lights flashed through the windows, strobing the neat rows of cookies and bagels and tinned soup. The snap and crackle of radio units warred with the syncopated squealing of tyres and the slamming of car doors as the store's automatic doors opened and shut.

Nick backed away, face averted, as the paramedics moved in over Schanke. Half crawling, half dragging himself across the scuffed linoleum floor, he fetched up against a display rack of potato chips and stopped, face buried into the crook of one arm, knees snatched tightly to his chest. The smell of blood soaked his senses.

Footsteps. A scudding heart beat.

"Nick?"

He grunted. "I'm fine."

"Nick, it's me. Natalie."

Natalie. "Stay back, Nat. I'm not ... safe."

A whisper of fabric against skin as she crouched beside him. "Look at me."

"No."

"Look at me," she insisted, and her fingers brushed against his arm.

Chill flesh burning with shame, with hunger, he turned his head until the corner of one glowing eye was revealed.

She inhaled sharply, pulled back her hand. "God, Nick, you're covered in —"

"I know."

"Wash it off. Now. There's a toilet to your left."

"Schanke."

"They're still working on him. Stonetree's not here yet. The others are busy. Do it now, while you still can."

"Don't," he said, as she reached out to help him to his feet.

Bowed over the wash basin, fingers anchored to the rim, he watched the bloody water disappear in a whirlpool of soapy froth. The face in the cracked mirror above it looked pale. Like anybody's face, after giving mouth to mouth to a dying man.

The blood on his shirt was still wet. Bad, but he could hardly go back out there naked to the waist. He watched his nostrils flare, his eyes go yellow. Blood. Blood. Schanke's blood. He was so *hungry.*

There was a knock on the door. "Nick?"

He swallowed, opened the door. "What?"

Natalie's face was crumpled with concern. "You okay?" She was holding a wrapped parcel. The paper was bright, splashed aqua and lemon. "Look, I bought this for my dad on the way to work tonight, but under the circumstances ..."

Carefully he took the parcel from her. Opened it. "Fortuitous," he said, looking down at the white silk shirt.

"Yeah, I guess it was kind of lucky. So put it on. It may be a bit big, but I don't suppose that matters."

He closed his eyes. The swift, steady beat of her heart boomed in his ears. Dear Nat. So prepared. So caring. So helpful.

"Nick ...?"

So ... *oblivious.* Her clear, honest eyes were puzzled. "Nick, are you sure you're all right?"

Fear, shame, fury: they were human heartbeats apart. "I told you, I'm fine."

Quickly he stripped off his stained shirt, splashed water across his chest, shrugged into the cool silk, and buttoned it. She reached out and plucked the ruined cotton shirt from his unresisting fingers.

"I'll burn this for you."

He opened his mouth to hurt her, but was prevented by Stonetree, looming up behind her in an ill fitting suit, his broad planed face stretched smooth with worry.

"Nick. You okay?"

He tucked the shirt into his trousers. "I'm fine, Captain."

"You riding in with Schanke? They're ready to move him to Mercy."

"No. I'll follow in my car. Excuse me," said Nick, and pushed past them both.

Schanke, shrouded beneath a blanket, intubated and hooked up to oxygen and plastic bags plumped with clear fluids that dripped into his arms, lay quiescent on the emergency gurney. Hands thrust into his pockets, Nick watched the paramedics wheel him out to the ambulance. Stonetree came up beside him.

"They said you kept him going with mouth to mouth. Probably saved his life."

Nick had never thought of Stonetree's bulk as comforting before. Immovable. Unyielding. Stalwart. All of those. But now he felt as though he could lean against that broad strength and be strengthened. He turned his head.

"He's my partner."

A smile touched Stonetree's grim mouth. "You getting soft in your old age, Nick? Is our departmental loner about to turn into a team player?"

Nick shook his head. "Leopards don't change their spots, Captain. You know that."

"You'd better get on down to the hospital. I haven't called Myra. I thought you'd want to do that."

"Yes. I'll call her."

"Did you see the perp, Nick?"

"Briefly. I'll get on it as soon as —"

They were approached by a uniformed officer, young, eager. He was holding a pencil. Threaded onto the end of it was a gun. "Captain! Captain, we found this out by the store's dumpster!"

Nick glanced at it. "That's the piece. The perp ditched it as he left." He glared at the officer. "Don't you know better than to stick a pencil down the barrel of a gun? You'll scratch the grooves and screw up the ballistics test. Next time put the pencil through the trigger guard, okay? Get it in an evidence bag, fast."

Stonetree said, "Nick," and nodded at the abashed officer. "He's right, Connolly. Go do it now."

"Yes, sir," said Connolly.

"You're sure that's the piece?" Nick nodded. "Good. Now go. Give despatch that description on the way to Mercy. The paperwork can wait."

"I'll see you there."

Natalie was busy with the dead store attendant. Glancing up as he went by, she said, "I'll be down at the hospital as soon as I've finished here."

He nodded. "All right."

A feather edge of anger touched the wide eyes, and was gone. "See you then."

He slapped the counter top with his hand, and left the store.

Natalie had to take a moment in the ladies before she could face the waiting room where Nick, Stonetree and, surely by now, Myra held vigil. Memory was a funny thing. Richard's death had eased itself from the forefront of her mind so slowly she'd barely noticed the process. Just, little by little, day by day, the immediacy of the pain had faded, and the frequency of the flashbacks had diminished. Until one day, about two months ago, she'd climbed exhausted into bed one morning and only then realised, saying good night to his picture on the dresser, that she'd not thought of him at all that shift. Not once.

She was sensible enough to know it was a blessing. She wanted her brother back, that would never change. But the blurring of those insane, awful days was nothing short of a godsend.

Now, Schanke's shooting had whetted the edge of memory's blade. Everything was back in focus, bright as diamonds in sunlight. She shuddered. Perfect recall must be a bitch.

Natalie splashed cold water on her face and blotted it dry with a paper towel. She stared owlishly at her reflection, a baffled frown marring her forehead. Something was bothering Nick. Something beyond the obvious tragedy that stood poised to engulf them. She knew him well enough, now, to decipher his moods, if not the reasons behind them.

Whatever it was, it involved her. She was damned if she'd imagined the hostility in his eyes. Sighing, she fished in her hand bag, pulled out her hairbrush, and dragged it through her springy brown hair. Damned stuff. Swear to God, she was going to cut it all off, any day now.

They were all in the waiting room. Myra had been crying but was quiet now, her small hand engulfed in Stonetree's massive clasp. Nick propped up a wall opposite, arms crossed over his chest, gaze fixed out of a window and onto the circular driveway far below, where the ambulances came and went, silently or not, depending on their business, and whether noise would profit their passengers.

Myra looked up as she entered the carefully pastel room. "Natalie!"

"Oh, Myra," she said, and found that the tears were going to come no matter how much she tried to deny them. For a moment they clutched at one another.

"You know — you know —" Myra gulped.

"Yes," said Natalie.

"All these years on the job, you know it could happen, you know it happens to other people, but you *never* think ..."

"I know," said Natalie.

Myra groped in her bag for fresh tissues. "Jenny's with the neighbours. She wanted to come down here, she adores Don, she idolises him, but I don't want her to be here, if --- this is no place for a little girl. But if he does --- if there's time -- she should be able to say good bye. I don't want her to grow up hating me because I didn't let her tell her Daddy goodbye. Should I call Helen, should I have her bring Jenny down here in case —"

"Myra," Natalie said firmly, "why don't we wait until we hear what the doctors say. Then if you need to bring Jenny here, we can arrange a police escort. Can't we, Captain?"

Stonetree nodded. "Sure."

"Have you heard anything?"

"He's still in surgery," Stonetree said.

"Oh, it's taking so long," Myra moaned. "Is that good, that it's taking so long? You're a doctor, Natalie, tell me. I want the truth."

"Myra ..." Natalie took her hand. "I'm sorry. I don't know. Don's been badly hurt. You know that. But the doctors will be doing everything they can to save him."

"They did everything they could to save your brother," Myra whispered.

Natalie didn't dare look at Nick. She cleared her throat. "We all did everything we could for Richard. Sometimes, it just isn't enough. But every situation is different. So don't lose hope, okay?"

Nick jerked away from the wall. "I'm going to check in. See if there's any word on the suspect."

Stonetree looked at him impassively. "Don't crowd them, Nick. Let them do their jobs. We're all on the same side, remember?"

Natalie watched him prowl down the corridor. "I'll be back in a second," she said to Myra, and dashed after him. "Nick!"

He stopped. "Nat."

"Nick, would you *talk* to me? Please?"

His smile was almost pleasant. "Sure. What would you like to talk about? The change in gondola design from the fourteenth to the fifteenth centuries? The impact of alum on the dye industry? The signing of the Magna Carta?"

She stared at him, stupefied. "*What?* "

"No? Then perhaps you could suggest a topic of conversation. Oh! And before I forget —" He pulled his wallet out of his back pocket and extracted several bills. Holding them out to her, he added, "For the shirt."

She struck his hand aside. The notes floated unheeded to the scuffed linoleum. "Stop it. Stop it! What the hell is wrong with you?"

He laughed, very softly. "Come on, Nat. You're one of the very few who knows the answer to that question."

"Excuse me," said an orderly, coming up behind them pushing a gurney piled high with clean sheets. They squashed together to let him go by and Natalie, looking up into Nick's face, saw a feral glow in his eyes. Thought she heard the echo of a snarl deep in his chest. She swallowed.

"What's your — condition — got to do with anything?" she demanded in a low voice, once the orderly was safely past.

"Everything. And nothing."

Closing her eyes, she snatched at the coat tails of her temper. Took a deep breath, then another. Remembered his face when she found him at the convenience store. Anger receded.

"Tell me what happened," she said. "Don't make me play guessing games, please. Just tell me."

"In a nutshell? Shorn of embellishment, excuse, prevarication, rationalisation and woe?" Nick's eyes were hard, and cold. The way they'd been on the night they met. "They're calling me a hero, did you know? Saying that I saved his life."

"You did," said Natalie.

He hissed. "I was within a heartbeat of tearing out his throat and draining him dry." Thumb and forefinger snapped into her line of sight, a tiny two inches apart. "This close, Natalie." The fingers relaxed, came to rest on the leaping fountain beneath her jaw. "This close."

He was serious. She could feel the blood leach from her face. Groped beside her for the wall, and pressed her sweat slicked palm flat to its rough surface. "But why? You've been around blood before, Nick, lots of times. Why now? Why tonight?"

He stared down at her. "Don't you get it, Nat? It's not just tonight, it's *every* night. I am *always* like this. Always hungry." His hands were on her shoulders, hard and hurting. He shook her once and let her go. "Do you know what it *is* to be hungry?"

Fear, metallic and sour, flooded her mouth. "Come off it, Nick. Of course I do."

"No. You don't." His face was savage. "How could you? Your hunger is satisfied with a Big Mac and a double serving of fries." He stared into the distance. "I know you're trying to help, Natalie. But restricting me to half a bottle a day isn't working. I'm so starved I nearly fed from Schanke."

"Oh," said Natalie, reaching for anger, contempt, anything familiar. "I see. Okay. I understand now. This is all *my* fault. I'm responsible for you being a vampire. *I* pushed you into bed with Janette. *I* bared your throat to LaCroix. *I* --"

His eyes were hazed gold. Lips drawn back in a snarl he said thickly, "No."

She wasn't afraid. Anger obliterated every other emotion. "No? So, what exactly are you saying, here, Nick? Are you saying you want to quit? Are you saying you've given up on being human? 'Cause if you are, your timing sucks. Okay? It really sucks. I'm sorry this happened, Nick. I'm sorry you got a fright. I'm sorry that after eight hundred years you haven't found a better way of dealing with your feelings than kicking the nearest scapegoat." She paused. Took a deep breath. "And right now, I'm sorry I ever met you."

She was shaking so hard she thought her bones would break. She had to use the wall as a support, so she could turn around and walk away from him, and keep on walking until he, too, was just a blurred memory.

As she moved he bent and picked up the notes from the carpet. Holding them out to her he said, "Don't forget these."

If they'd been alone, she would have spat on him. "I don't want your money."

He reached out and took her hand. The unnaturally cool fingers prised open her clenched fist, laid the money across her sweating palm, and folded her hand shut.

"I won't be beholden."

"You already are!"

"No, Nat," he said gently. "That debt's been paid."

She could hear her heart thundering in her chest. "I don't want your money," she repeated, slowly and clearly. "I'll give it away."

He smiled. "As you wish. Just be careful, Natalie. Your charity is a double edged sword."

She hit him.

Heads turned up and down the corridor. Nick's polite smile remained. "Excuse me," he said. "I have a phone call to make."

She watched him walk away. Then she spun on her heel and returned to the waiting room. Myra had collapsed into an exhausted doze. Stonetree said, "What the hell was all that about?"

Natalie shook her head. "It was nothing. A misunderstanding."

"You don't slap a man's face in public for a simple misunderstanding," Stonetree began, then stopped.

There was a doctor approaching, clad in sweat-stained surgical greens. A mask dangled around his neck. Natalie put her hand on Myra's shoulder and shook her gently.

"Myra ..."

"Mrs Schanke? I'm Dr Herbert," the surgeon said.

"Don ..." Myra said faintly.

"Is one tough son of a gun," Herbert replied. "He's in recovery right now, then we'll be moving him to intensive care.

He's stable, his vital signs are good, and no major organs suffered irreparable damage."

"Oh," said Myra blankly. "Then — he's going to be all right?"

"Barring complications, yes. Eventually."

At her back, Natalie heard Stonetree stifle a small sound in his throat. Her own vision blurred, cleared. She put her arm around Myra's shoulder and squeezed, fiercely.

"I want to see him," gasped Myra. "When can I see him?"

"Once we've moved him to ICU, you can sit with him. How's that?"

"Oh, that's fine, Dr Henderson, just fine. Thank you. I'm sorry, I'm feeling a little strange." Myra turned to Natalie. "Did you hear that? Don's going to be all right. He's going to be all right!"

Natalie hugged her, and wept. For Schanke and his family, whose lives weren't going to be the same after this. For Stonetree, because he couldn't weep for himself. For herself, because even though Don Schanke hadn't died tonight, something had.

But mostly she wept for Richard, who for many reasons had not survived, and whose miracle had turned to ashes on the tongue.

CHAPTER TWO

Janette surveyed her bumping, grinding, jiggling clientele over the rim of her wine glass, and thought happily of the outrageously expensive dress she'd bought last night. It was black, of course -- what other colour was there -- and scattered with diamonds. Not that she actually needed a new dress. But that was completely beside the point.

A stirring in the back of her mind turned her gaze to the club entrance. A moment later Nicola entered. He looked exhausted, his pallor one shade less than becoming. Their eyes met, and she lifted her glass to him. He threaded his way between the revellers who, oblivious to everything save the shriek and thump of the music and the variegated beating of their hearts, closed ranks behind him as he passed.

"Nicola," said Janette, and lifted her parted lips.

His kiss was all teeth and temper. Releasing her, he reached out one hand, plucked her private bottle from the bar top and headed to the booth at the rear.

She tipped back her head and sighed. *Merde.* And she'd actually been in a good mood for once. Because her smoking irritated him, she took a moment to fit a fresh cigarette into her ebony holder, and ignite it with the lighter some count or other had given her at the turn of the century. Then she stepped up to the booth and slid in opposite him, manicured fingers straying to her hair.

"I decided on a new look. *Qu'est-ce que tu pense?*"

His swift glance took in the slicked back severity that only served to emphasise her dark eyes and prominent cheekbones.

"Ravishing," he siad, and returned to his contemplation of the bottle.

She flicked ash into the tray. "Tut tut, Nicola. If that is all the sincerity you can muster in the presence of a lady, then it is no wonder that your love life is a desert.

His smile was far too brief. "Very ravishing," he amended.

She watched him as he stared at the bottle, watched the small, red flame flicker in the depths of his eyes. What had set him off this time? It seemed to take less and less, these days. Living among mortals, he'd forgotten how to be patient.

"Schanke took three bullets tonight," he said.

Janette blew a perfect smoke ring. "He is dead? That is sad for you. Me, I never liked him."

"No. He isn't dead. The doctors think he'll pull through okay, eventually."

"Ah. Then once he returns to duty, you will again be working with him. The reason for your execrable mood becomes clear."

"Janette ..."

She rapped her satined knuckles on the table top. "Be careful of the tone you take with me, Nicola. You march in here, take me away from my work, expect me to know precisely which petty aggravation has you brooding this time —"

"You don't understand," he said.

"Then enlighten me. Or drink. Or dance. Or leave. But don't waste my time, just because I have so much of it."

The look he gave her was murderous. She stared back, unflinching, clasping the cigarette holder between her lips and fingers. He was the first to look away. His gaze returned to the bottle of blood and wine, became an unsettled mix of yearning and revulsion.

She tapped more ash into the tray, watched the fine powder drift downwards. "Do you want it because you're hungry, or because drinking it will hurt your little mortal friend?"

She might just as well have thrown holy water in his face. Snarling, golden eyed and fanged, he manacled her wrist with his fingers and dragged her half way across the table towards him.

"*Both.*"

Controlling herself with difficulty, Janette said, "*Imbecile*! Let me go! Do you want a scene?"

His fingers sprang free. Closing his eyes he turned away, every second's struggle reflected in his malleable face.

"Nicola, Nicola," she sighed. "What have you done this time?"

Haltingly, he told her. She listened, angered and saddened in turns. When he was finished, she said, "This surprises you? Nicola, what else can you expect, if you insist on keeping yourself permanently half starved? This ridiculous regimen, this *cow* drinking, has to stop. You need real blood, human blood. When will you give up this insane idea that you can somehow regain your mortality?"

"Never!" he retorted.

Pity hardened her face. "You truly believe that one day, you will be mortal again?"

"Yes."

"And because you believe it, then naturally it will happen. Silly me, to disagree." Out of patience, she stood and stared down at him. "Feel free to stay for as long as you like." She picked up the bottle. "Forgive me if I take this. You may need it, but you don't really want it."

"Janette..."

"No! You put me in such a temper, Nicola, I could smack you."

His fingernails scored the table top. "Natalie did that already."

"So? I must remember to thank her, the next time we meet."

She left him sitting in the booth, and went about her business of running the nightclub. An hour later he was still sitting there, eyes fixed on his clasped hands, subdued in the dim lighting.

Calling herself every kind of a fool, she picked up the phone.

By five a.m. all the mortals had gone home, and only Janette's fledglings were left, fluttering half heartedly beneath the garish lights. So when he caught the swift bump-bump of a human heartbeat he knew, without looking up, who had entered the club.

Rage rewoke briefly to snarl in Janette's direction. She lifted her eyebrows at him and shrugged, the collarbones supporting her exquisite throat etched in black and white.

When he finally found the courage to glance at Natalie, he saw that she was staring at Janette. Some unreadable look passed between them: Janette smiled, the first genuine smile he'd ever seen her give Nat, and Natalie smiled tentatively back. Then she turned her head, and the smile died.

Damn Janette. This was her way of punishing him for spoiling her evening, for throwing his dream in her face yet again and by doing so, rejecting her.

Natalie waited on the far edge of the dance floor. He could see from the set of her shoulders and determined tilt of her chin that she had no intention of reducing the distance between them by so much as the length of her little toe. So he stood, and eased himself out from behind the bulwark of the booth, and crossed the wasteland of the dance floor to face her.

"Make it good," she said.

Hesitantly he reached for her hand. Carried it to his cheek and, eyes closed, felt its mortal warmth sun his skin. Tension sang in the spaces between her bones. Turning his face he pressed his lips to her palm.

"Forgive me," he said.

She sighed. Her fingers relaxed against him. Her heart beat slowed, semibreve to breve. Only then did he open his eyes.

In a resounding silence they stared at one another. She had been crying: faint black smudges beneath her lower lashes betrayed the depth of the pain he had inflicted. He would have wept for that, if he could. If the last of his bloody tears had not spilled centuries before.

She must have seen something in his face, however. Her tight lips softened, and the shadows in her eyes receded.

Wordlessly she turned on her heel and headed for the door. Without looking back, he followed.

Outside, the first fingers of light pushed through the gaps between the buildings.

"I'd better drive you home," said Natalie. "Got your keys?"

He tossed them to her but didn't move. Birdsong shrieked a warning, and window after window exploded into rosy incandescence.

"Nick!" Natalie said sharply. "Come on."

He ignored her. Opened his mind to the terror that crested the wave of light rolling towards him. He still believed in penance.

"Nick! For God's sake would you get in the car!"

He was frightening her again. She had the boot open and waiting, so he climbed inside and dozed through his hunger and the trip home.

Riding the elevator up to the loft she said, "My car's back at the club. I'll need to call a cab."

"Take the Caddy," Nick said.

She grinned briefly. "No thanks. Schanke claims he still has nightmares about the day he smashed it."

The lift bumped to a stop. Nick dragged the door open and stood back for Natalie to get out. Once inside the apartment she headed for the phone. He closed the door, retrieved the shutter remote from between the cushions on the couch and blinded the windows.

Natalie replaced the receiver. "Ten minutes." She crossed her arms over her chest and wandered to an arm chair. Sat down and inspected a stain on her skirt.

Nick turned away from the couch to frown at his latest work, sitting half completed on its easel. It needed something. Green, maybe. That, or a decent burial. "Did you see him?"

She nodded. "He's stable. Vitals are good. Barring complications, he'll make it okay. Nick --"

He glanced at her. Her expression was compassionate and exasperated.

"We both know you're starving. Don't hold back on my account."

"I'm not."

She leaned forward, hands cupping her eblows. "I mean, it's not like I've never seen you drink blood before."

"I've waited this long. Another few minutes won't kill me."

Any other time she would have groaned at his terrible pun. Now she just watched as he put a careful, deliberate distance between himself and the refrigerator ... and herself. Sat on the far arm of the couch, his face as remote as she'd ever seen it.

"Don't be ridiculous, Nick," she said briskly. "Drink, and be done with it."

He shook his head. "A vampire in a feeding frenzy isn't a pretty sight, Nat."

"Oh, for heaven's sake! Spare me, please. I cut up dead bodies for a living, remember? And under the circumstances ..." She hesitated. "I guess a little binge would be understandable."

He smiled. "A little binge ..."

"I know, I know, it goes against everything I've ever said, but I think the circumstances are exceptional. God knows I hit the bottle when I got in tonight."

Nick shifted off the arm of the lounge and onto its seat. "Have you ever been on a diet, Nat?"

She snorted. "Nick, every Western woman on the face of this planet has been on at least one diet. Why are we talking about diets? What --"

"Ever break it?"

She shrugged. "Sure. Everybody breaks a diet sometime. You have a binge, you hate yourself for a while, you climb back on the wagon."

"How long do you binge for?"

A reminiscent, shamefaced smile brushed her lips. "An hour. Two. An evening, maybe, if it's been a particularly bad day."

"And afterwards ... how long do you hate yourself for?"

She spread her hands wide. "A few minutes, a few hours. It depends how long and how badly you binged. Nick, what does this have --"

He looked at her. "My last -- binge -- went for three centuries."

"Oh," said Natalie. She took a deep breath. "Nick, the past is over and done with. All that matters is the person you are now, today. In 1994, Nick Knight is a good person. The other stuff ... it doesn't matter. Not to me, at least."

"You think not?" His lips twisted. "Forgive me, Nat, if I disagree."

The intercom buzzed. Natalie stood, and smoothed down her skirt. "That's my ride."

He remained seated. "Thanks for bringing me home."

"No problem." She headed for the elevator. Paused. Said over her shoulder, "I wish you'd trust me, Nick."

He didn't look at her. "You know I do."

"With your present, and your future, yes. But not your past. And you are your past, as well as your present, and your future."

There was blood in the refrigerator. Seven long strides, or the blink of an eye. "That's what I'm afraid of."

She opened the elevator door, stepped inside. "I'm not."

The lift ground downwards.

"You should be," Nick said to the empty room.

But because a day never felt right without at least one conversation with Natalie in it, he stopped by the Coroner's Building on his way to work the next evening.

Grace looked up from her desk and smiled. "Good evening, Detective. How are you?"

"Fine, Grace. Yourself?"

"Couldn't be better," said Grace. She brandished a fancy dress catalogue at him. "I'm driving myself crazy trying to decide what to wear to the Mayor's Charity Ball. How about you? What are you going to wear?"

Nick hesitated. "I -- actually, I don't think I can make it."

Grace's sigh was profoundly cynical. "Don't tell me. You have to stay in and wash your hair, right?"

"Not exactly."

"Then what? Detective, this little shindig is set to be the social occasion of the year. How can you possibly not go?"

It was easy. Well ... maybe not easy, but necessary. He'd give anything to take Nat to the ball. To hold her close ... to rest his cheek against her buoyant hair ... to feel the warmth of her body pressed to his and inhale her perfume ... But not only would it start tongues wagging again, it could very well upset the precarious balance of their relationship. They walked a knife edge as it was. Why invite injuries that might never heal?

"Maybe next year," he said, and headed down the corridor to the lab.

She wasn't alone. Four strides from the open door he heard her laugh. Heard another voice, deep, lightly accented, saying, "– so of course, we had to let him go."

"Of course," Natalie's voice agreed.

They were standing opposite one another, Natalie resting against her desk, the unfamiliar man against the edge of the dissection table. Both nursed mugs of coffee, both wore identical smiles. Body language experts called it 'mirroring'. It meant that the people involved felt comfortable with one another. That they wanted the other person, or persons, to know it. Nat looked very ... comfortable. At ease. A becoming flush of colour warmed her cheeks. The man looked comfortable too, and was regarding her with definite interest. He could remember looking at women like that. He felt a sharp jolt beneath his ribs.

"Hi, Nat," he said. She jumped. "Nick! Hi!"

Her visitor put down his mug and stared with open curiosity. Nick found himself staring back. The man was in his early thirties. Tall, maybe four inches taller than he. Built like a lumberjack. Dark blonde. Deep set, hooded blue eyes observed the world from either side of a nose that thrust forward like the prow of a ship. His skin was brown, his teeth vivid. It wasn't a handsome face, but it wouldn't be quickly forgotten.

Not by him, at least.

Natalie said, "Nick, have you met Alex yet? He's just transferred into the 27th from Vancouver."

"Last week," said the man, and held out his hand. "Alex Haid."

He hated shaking hands with strangers. "Nick Knight," he said, and resisted the despicable urge to play 'who's got the strongest handshake?' He'd have enjoyed winning too much.

"Ah," said Haid. "I didn't think we had more than one Nick at the 27th. I've heard a lot about you."

Natalie's regard was spiced with a frown. He glanced at her, noting the tightness of her grip on the coffee mug, and made himself smile. "Well, don't believe everything you hear. Welcome on board, Alex."

Haid nodded. "Thanks," he said. "Listen, I'm sorry about Don Schanke. It's not the way I prefer to get the chance to work with you."

"Work with me?" Nick repeated.

Haid frowned. "Damn. I assumed you knew."

"Knew what?" said Nick, with extreme courtesy.

"You'd better check it out with the Captain," said Haid. "But honestly, I thought you knew. Stonetree's assigned me as your temporary partner."

"Really?" said Nick. Still smiling. His face was going to set any second now. "Great."

"Well, I'd better hit the road," said Haid. "Been a long day."

"Oh, leave that, Alex," said Natalie, as he crossed to the sink, tipped the remains of his coffee down the drain and began to rinse out the mug.

"Too late," said Haid, and turned the mug upside down to drain. Reaching for a towel, he dried his hands. Grinned. Natalie mirrored that, too.

"Thanks for dropping those fibre comparisons over," she said. "And for sharing the coffee. I've got three cold ones sitting in the fridge waiting for me, none of whom I'm anxious to meet."

"Sure thing," said Haid. "Any time." He nodded at Nick. "I guess I'll see you at the office tomorrow night, then."

"Uh huh," said Nick.

"Night, Alex," said Natalie

Silence, punctuated by the sound of running water as Natalie rinsed her own mug.

"You okay?" he asked eventually.

She turned. "I'm fine. What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing's wrong with me."

Drying her hands, she said, "No? Then what was that all about?"

"All what?"

"You know. It isn't Alex's fault if Stonetree's decided to make him your temporary partner." She crashed her instrument cart closer. Laughed, without amusement. "I'm not sure if you realise just how damned haughty you are sometimes."

"Haughty?" Nick repeated delicately.

"Haughty," she said, and snapped on a fresh pair of gloves.

"Well, I guess you'd know," he retorted. "It takes one to know one, after all."

"Oh, piffle!" snapped Natalie. "I am not in the least bit haughty. Get out of my way, I need to get into that cupboard. You were damned rude just now, and we both know it. So climb down off that high horse of yours, Detective Knight, and admit it.

If he told her she was beautiful when she was angry, she'd hit him. He said, "I have to go."

Despite the colour in her cheeks, her voice was cold. "Fine. Go. Please note that I'm not flinging my arms about your legs in an effort to restrain you."

Outside, he kicked an empty Coke can and watched it smack into the brick wall opposite. There came a dull clattering sound as the flattened aluminium landed on the sidewalk.

Haughty? Him? Piffle.

It wasn't until he stalked into the precinct house and looked for Schanke at their shared desk that reality smacked him hard in the face.

Schanke was in hospital. Schanke had come within an ace of death. Schanke would not be riding with him tonight, or any night in the foreseeable future. No souvlaki stained paperwork. No disgusting, half eaten jelly doughnuts smeared all over his side of the desk. No rambling stories about Myra's second cousin twice removed who could get him a great deal on a hundredweight of turkey sausages. No bitching. No moaning. No Schanke.

Rock still in the desolate squad room, Nick replied automatically to the greetings and commiserations around him. When had Schanke become important? When was the first time he'd looked for the Polish-Italian nicotine addict with delusions of studhood, and been glad to find him? *When*?

Stonetree came out of his office.

"Captain!" Nick called. "I need to talk to you."

Stonetree closed his office door behind them, and pointed to the chair opposite his desk. "You get any sleep?"

Nick sat. "Some."

"Been to see Schanke?"

"Not yet."

Stonetree grunted. "You sort things out with Natalie?"

"Yes."

"Love's a bitch," Stonetree observed. "It's also none of my business. I just don't want personal baggage interfering with the job. *Capisce*?"

Nick blinked. "Understood."

Stonetree smiled and clasped his hands behind his head. "My old man told me once, never kid a kidder. Glad to see someone gave you the same advice. Now, about arrangements. Doctors say Schanke'll be out of action six, eight weeks."

"No problem, Captain," said Nick. "I'll just work on my own till he's back on duty."

"There's a new guy come on board," Stonetree continued. "Transferred in from Vancouver last week. Got his shield a month ago. Name of Haid. Alex Haid."

"We've met," said Nick.

"Good. He's gonna fill in for Schanke. I want him working nights with you the first few weeks. You can show him the ropes. When you think he's ready he'll go on days, do shift changeover with you."

Nick leaned forward, hands braced on the edge of Stonetree's desk. "I know. He told me. Look, Captain, I don't want another partner. I don't need another partner. In fact, I don't really need a partner at all. I was doing just fine on my own. I --"

"Do you know something, Nick?" Stonetree asked, lowering his arms and settling them comfortably across his stomach. "A lot of the time, when we think we know what's best for us, we really know diddly squat. Take you, for instance. Now you're a guy who's been around the block a few times. You know what's what. You can take care of yourself, usually. But you got a blind spot, like the rest of us."

"A blind spot," said Nick.

"That's right. You think you don't need people. You think you do just fine on your own. Me? I'm with Milton. No man is an island. It's taken a whole year working with Schanke to get you to lower your drawbridge, Detective Knight, and if you think I'm gonna let you use this situation as an excuse to haul it back up again ... well, you're wrong, is all I can say."

The broad, fleshy face looked benign. Friendly. They might have been discussing the weather. But the eyes were obdurate. Nick sighed. "You're the Captain, Captain."

"I am, aren't I?" said Stonetree with vast satisfaction. "Now, since all that's settled, you'd better get on down to line up."

Nick stared at him. "The shooter?"

"We ran the prints from the gun and came up with a name. Michael Hicks. McRead and Estevez brought him in round about an hour ago."

"Great," said Nick, and headed for the door. Reaching for the handle he hesitated, and turned. "Captain? Am I -- haughty?"

"Sure," said Stonetree comfortably. "Haughty. Temperamental. Moody. Stubborn. You're also a damn fine detective."

Nick nodded, slowly. "Thanks," he said. "I think."

"Now get outa here," said Stonetree. "Quit cluttering up my office fishing for compliments. You've got an attempted cop killer to take off the streets."

The line up, identification and subsequent paperwork took just under half an hour. The fierce satisfaction dampened his edginess, but only temporarily. What he wanted to do was hit the streets, see what he could turn up on the Zabriskie knifing, but he was overdue on his housekeeping. He spent three hours on outstanding paperwork, then filled in the rest of the shift verifying witness statements and suspects' alibis for his current caseload. Whoever wrote those tv cop shows had clearly never done the job. Paperwork was an occupational hazard more deadly than bullets.

The shift dragged to an end. Nick waved goodbye to the desk sergeant and went outside. It was a beautiful morning. Sunrise was eighteen minutes away. Standing on the steps, he stared at the pearl grey sky.

These were the worst, these brief, hesitant moments between night and day. When there was light enough to see by, when the moon was a mere enamel disc, pale and insubstantial, fading before the encroaching sun. Now the memories plagued him, of life before death, of vaulting blue skies and brown

skin and the glitter of sunlight on the windows of the manor; the chapel, as he galloped towards the welcoming arms of his family ...

Preserve your memories, Simon and Garfunkel sang once. *They're all that's left you.*

Indeed.

He drove home, faster than the speed limits allowed, and made it to the cool retreat of his darkened loft just as the first warm rays of light began to steal over the city.

Natalie was waiting for him, shoes off, feet tucked underneath her on the leather lounge.

He tugged the elevator door closed, tossed his keys on the kitchen bench and crossed to the fridge. Poured himself a glass of blood, replaced the bottle and swallowed the thick red liquid. Felt it thrill him, burn him, renew him, even though it was only cow.

He put the empty glass on the table and turned to face her. "Haughty, huh?"

She shrugged, deprecatingly. "Sorry."

"I don't mean to be."

Smiling, she said, "I know that. You'd be insufferable if you meant it. As it is, you're just -- aggravating."

He sighed. "Haughty and aggravating. Remind me not to call you as a character witness."

She threw a cushion at him. "Fool."

He caught the cushion, tossed it onto the lounge and sat opposite her in an arm chair. Smiled. "Sorry."

Her smile was dazzling. "Forget it. I guess you could describe it as an occupational hazard. For doctors, as well as vampires."

"Yeah."

"So," she said, regarding him seriously. "Is this Alex Haid really going to be your new partner?"

"My *temporary* partner," Nick corrected. "Yes."

"You'll have to be careful. I mean, I've only met the guy for five minutes and I can tell he's no Schanke in the gullibility department."

"I know. But it won't be for long. I'll be fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I don't have any choice, any way. Stonetree's not going to budge on this one." He brightened. "I nearly forgot. We got the kid who shot Schanke. I pulled him out of a lineup tonight. His prints match the ones we lifted from the gun. He tested positive for residue. Ballistics gave us a match on the bullets. The case is solid."

She leaned forward to touch his arm. "Nick, that's fantastic."

"Yeah." His smile faded.

"What?" Natalie prompted, as he picked at a loose thread on the arm chair.

He hesitated. "Nothing. It's weird ... but I miss having Schanke around. Crazy, huh?"

She shook her head. "No. He's your friend. Of course you'll miss him."

"A good friend," Nick agreed. He glanced at her. Looked at the floor. "And so are you. Nat, are we ... okay?"

She didn't smile. "Yes. We're okay."

"What I said, at the hospital -- I know that sorry doesn't cover it, but ... I am sorry. Nothing in my life is your fault. When we met --" He stopped. Interlaced his fingers and stared at them. "I was on the brink of walking into the light. The only thing that stopped me was you." He looked up, and his tone changed. "Pain is a poor way to repay such a debt. And all I seem to be good at is hurting people."

Natalie shifted protestingly. "Nick --"

"A predator who chooses not to kill is still a predator," he said. "I may look human, but I'm not. Don't ever forget that."

Hands spread wide, Natalie said, "I never know what to say when you say things like that. Biologically, I know you're right. You're dead. You've been dead for nearly eight centuries. But something is keeping you on your feet. Something is keeping you -- alive. I don't know what that is. Yet. But it doesn't mean you're not human. Nick, you're probably the most human person I know. And part of being human is failing. Of hurting people you care about. And finding the courage to say you were wrong, and you're sorry, picking yourself up and going on. It's the getting up that counts, Nick. Not the falling down."

Absolution was never meant to be that easy. Crime deserved punishment, not forgiveness without a second glance. Maybe the feeling was nothing more than a remnant of his medieval acculturation, the inescapable foundation of his life, but it was what he believed.

Natalie stood up and sat on the arm of the chair. Took his hand in hers and squeezed it. "Nick, it's forgiven and forgotten. Like I keep telling you: the past is in the past. Let it lie."

Wonderingly he said, "What would it take, to drive you away?"

There was no fervor in her voice, no strident emotion. She said, "You could never drive me away. You could only leave."

He looked at her. "I don't want to leave, Nat. I don't. But I've been trying for so long."

"And look how far you've come."

"Not far," he said. "A cross still burns me. Food still repulses me. And sunlight ..." He stared at the shuttered windows."

Her response was vehement. "Why do you always belittle yourself? You can *hold* a cross now, Nick. Without bursting into flames. You've eaten real food, and kept it down. You just don't do it often enough. And as for sunlight, you can tolerate a lot more than you used to. So don't you dare sit there and tell me you haven't made progress!"

He had to smile. "No, ma'am."

"Have you thought any more about replacing the sun bed?" she demanded. "Because that's a vital part of the process."

He shook his head. "It scares me."

"Do it anyway."

"I'll think about it."

"Make sure you do." She stood. Pushed her feet back into her shoes. Reached down her hand to tousle his hair. Instead he captured it and carried it to his lips

"Thanks, Nat."

"Any time. See you round."

He made himself wait until the elevator had returned empty to the second floor before crossing to the refrigerator and pulling out the bottle again. Popping the cork he poured himself another generous glassful and considered taking an aerial short cut to his room and the blessed oblivion of sleep.

But Natalie wouldn't like that, so he trod the stairs one at a time, and resisted the urge to empty the bottle before exhaustion extinguished him.

CHAPTER THREE

Alex slid into the chair on Schanke's -- no, his -- side of the desk and flipped open a case folder. His eyebrows rose as he sorted through the handwritten notes, the half completed forms, the scribbled afterthoughts. Hell's bells. How was he supposed to catch up on his adopted case load if this mish mash of incomplete paperwork was all he had to guide him?

"Report writing isn't Schanke's forte," a voice said behind him.

Knight.

Alex threw down the folder. "I can see that."

Knight's smile vanished. "He's a good cop."

Hands up, Alex said, "I know, I know. Sorry. I didn't mean anything." He sighed. "Look, detective, I get the feeling you're not thrilled with the idea of working with me. That's okay. I'll ask Stonetree to -- "

"No," said Knight. He sat down. Rubbed his hands over his face and sighed. "I'm the one who should be apologizing. Sorry. I'm more than happy to show you the ropes."

Alex relaxed. "Apology accepted. I guess you're entitled to a little tetchiness. The last few days have been rough."

"That's no excuse for bad manners," said Knight. "So. You know where everything is, you know how things run around here?"

"Pretty much," said Alex. "I'm relying on you to put me straight if I make a mistake, though."

"Sure. No problem."

Alex smiled. Maybe working with this *wunderkind* wasn't going to be the nightmare he'd anticipated after last night. It was definitely going to be interesting, fitting together the snippets he'd been told by the other detectives, by Stonetree, by some of the uniforms.

He had good instincts, but he wasn't yet certain what they were telling him. He'd have to wait and see. One thing was for sure, though. The guy looked positively anaemic. Hadn't he ever heard of iron tablets?

"Think you'll recognise me in a dark alley?" Knight asked wryly.

"Sorry," Alex said. "Didn't realise I was staring."

"No problem. So. How long have been on the force?"

"Five years. Before that I was a musician, and before that I was in training to be a priest."

"A priest."

Alex never knew a face could look so still. "Yeah. I quit a week before ordination. Do you have a problem with that? I'm not a bible bashing fundamentalist, or anything. Just a common or garden Catholic."

"No. No problem."

"How about you?"

"How about me what?"

"Are you Catholic? Anglican? Agnostic? Atheist, maybe?"

Knight picked up a pen and tapped it on the desk. "Why?"

Alex shrugged. "Just wondered."

"I was born a Catholic."

"You lapsed?"

Tap, tap, tap, went the pen. "Something like that. Tell me, do you always ask this many questions?"

Grinning, he said, "Sorry. It's just the way I am. Got me into a lot of trouble at the seminary. In the end Brother Andrew used to just throw up his hands and say, 'My son, one does not question the word of God."

"But you kept on asking anyway."

"Sure. I mean, if you don't ask, you never find out."

Knight tossed the pen aside. "And sometimes you find out more than you bargained for."

"Not possible," said Alex, shaking his head. "I like to know everything. I guess I was born congenitally curious."

"Curiosity killed the cat."

Alex raised his eyebrows. "Is that a warning?"

"Something like that." Knight stood. "Come on. We've got some witnesses to re-interview."

"Which case?" said Alex, hurrying to catch up.

"The Donalson shooting."

"Of course, right," said Alex. "The Donalson shooting."

Like he'd know Donalson from a hole in the ground after being here all of five minutes, right?

Welcome to Homicide, Detective Haid.

"This is a fantastic car," he commented, as Knight swung the Caddy into the traffic. "They just don't make 'em like this anymore."

"It suits me," said Knight, changing lanes.

He sighed. Clearly, Knight belonged to the minimalist school of conversation. The next few weeks were going to be ... introspective.

The radio squawked. "Eighty one kilo, eighty one kilo, do you copy?"

He took the call. "This is eighty one kilo, despatch. What's on your mind?"

"Got a message here for Knight. See the lady at The Raven, soonest. You copy that?"

"Yeah, we copy. Thanks, despatch." He replaced the mike and looked at Knight. "That make any sense to you?"

Knight nodded, and eased over another lane. "Yes."

"Oh good. So long as one of us knows what's going on, I'm happy."

"Then you're easily contented."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Alex contradicted pleasantly. "I just like to conserve my energy for important things."

"Like asking questions?"

He grinned. "Something like that."

Fifteen minutes later he was looking at The Raven Night Club through the wound down passenger window. "They play live music here?"

"No," said Knight.

"Pity." He reached for the door handle.

"No," said Knight.

"What?"

"Stay out here. The Raven isn't what you'd call a safe place."

He took a deep breath, and let it out conservatively.

"Okay. I'm a great believer in starting as you mean to continue, so let's get a few things straight. For whatever the duration, you are my partner. Now I am perfectly aware that you are more experienced than I am, that you are, in fact, the most successful detective in the precinct. Which means I'll happily take directions when all we've got to go on are a burnt matchstick, three yak hairs and a rottweiler's toe nail clippings. What you're not is my keeper. So don't ever tell me to eat up my greens, brush my teeth or stay out of somewhere because it isn't safe. If I'd wanted safe, I would have taken my vows."

He got out of the car. Two steps from The Raven's door Knight was in front of him, one hand on his arm. He was strong for someone that pale. The blue eyes were intent, intense. The light voice was suddenly deeper.

"You don't want to go in there," he said.

Alex could hear his own heart beat. He stared at Knight, unblinking, then shook his head. Blinked.

"Yes, I do," he said, stepped past him, and went inside. He flashed his badge at the bouncer, and moved further in.

Strident, bass heavy music battered his ears. Great decor. Early Grim. The dance floor was packed, though how they could dance to that catwerwauling was beyond him. He tried to be open minded, he really did, but it was hard to escape the influence of a classical education. Speculative eyes followed him as he circumnavigated the revellers. He saw Knight. His partner was threading his way between bodies

and dangling chains, heading for the bar at the back. A woman posed there, glass in one hand, cigarette holder in the other, dressed in black. She was beautiful. Knight reached her. They kissed.

Knight's lover? He wasn't married, he knew that much. If the woman was his lover he'd managed to keep it a secret, which was little short of a miracle. And yet, there was nothing secretive about the way he kissed her. This guy was getting more interesting by the minute.

He continued his circular inspection of the room, and yearned for bionic ears.

"*Bon soir, Nicola,*" said Janette.

"Janette," said Nick, and pressed his spine against the bar top.

She raised her glass, eyeing him over the rim, and sipped. Watched his nostrils flare, and the betraying drift of his fingers towards his lips. "You did not say good bye to me, the other night."

"I was angry."

"And now?"

"I'm working. *Qu'est-ce que tu desir?*"

She did not reply. Looked instead across the room, where Alex stood shaking his head over one of her paintings.

"*Qui est-ce ?*"

"*Il s'appelle Alex Haid. Il est mon nouveau associe.*"

Janette's eyebrows escalated. "*O la? C'est dangereux, ca.*"

Nick grimaced. "*Oui, je sais.*"

Janette savoured another mouthful from her glass, then reached over to tap the ash from her cigarette. "So do something about it, *cher* Nicola."

"There's nothing I can do."

"You mean you choose to do nothing."

"It's the same thing," said Nick.

"*Pas de tout,*" Janette snapped.

"Janette ..." There was the merest suggestion of a snarl in his voice.

Janette pouted, but did not pursue the issue. She had time. Instead she inhaled deeply on her cigarette, then waved it in the direction of her office. "That business of the counterfeit money, you remember? You asked me to keep my eyes open, as yet another favour to you?"

"What about it?"

"There is a man in my office, who tonight attempted to pay his bill with a crisp new twenty dollar bill. Unfortunately for him, it was not a genuine crisp new twenty dollar bill. I ... asked ... him if he had made the money himself, and he agreed that he had."

"In front of witnesses?"

"The bar tender, several patrons. Good enough?"

"Perfect," said Nick, and kissed her fervently. "The patrons --"

"One was mortal. She's still here."

"Great." Nick attracted Alex's attention and waved him over. "Janette's got a robbery suspect in custody. Strictly speaking it's not ours, but we're here so we'll do the honours. Get a statement from her, then the bar tender and --" He looked at Janette. "Who's the other witness?"

With the glowing tip of her cigarette, Janette indicated a bright young thing dressed in strategically placed black sequins and not much else.

"That woman there."

Nick looked at Alex. "Okay?"

"Sure," Alex agreed. He reached into his back pocket for his notebook and pen.

Nick nodded, then said to Janette, "The suspect's in your office?"

"Yes. Alma is minding him for me."

"Alma! Is that wise?"

Janette lifted her glass to her lips and drained it in one long swallow. "Of course not. But then, he should not have attempted to steal from me." She smiled at him. "Don't worry. I told her to leave him alone, and she knows better than to cross me."

"I'll go and rescue him, then," said Nick.

Janette smiled after him consideringly then turned her attention to Alex. "So. Nicola tells me your name is Alex?"

"That's right," said Alex. God, she really was beautiful. But strangely, she did not stir him. There was something ...cold ... about her. Infinitely watchful. And very, very dangerous.

Knight was welcome to her.

"Is something wrong, Alex?" Janette asked kindly.

"Wrong? No. Sorry. Now, if you could just tell me, in your own words, what happened here tonight?" said Alex, and focussed his mind on the job.

After depositing the counterfeiter back at the precinct, they spent the rest of the night chasing leads on the Donalson shooting. The fourth in a series of break-ins in the warehouse district had resulted in the death of a security guard. Alex couldn't help but be impressed by the fact that Knight spoke not only fluent Chinese, but Greek and Italian as well.

In the end they came up with several promising avenues for investigation. Cruising back to the precinct house, Alex smothered another yawn and stared through the windscreen at the imperceptibly lightening sky.

"I don't know how you can work a permanent night shift," he said. "My body clock wouldn't stand for it."

"You get used to it," said Knight. "Besides, I don't have much of a choice."

"Your allergy. I heard. What happens?"

Knight glanced at him. "I burn."

Alex pulled a sympathetic face. "Ouch. I remember I got a really bad case of sunburn once. Blisters and everything. Not a pleasant experience."

"No," said Knight.

Back in the squad room, they quickly wrote up notes.

"Right. I'm out of here," said Knight. "Go home, Alex, get some sleep. I'll see you tomorrow night."

"You're the boss," said Alex.

Knight put on his sun glasses, turned up the collar of his jacket and, without looking back, thrust his bare hands into his pockets and left the building.

Five days later, Natalie was in the middle of excavating her fourth bullet ridden corpse for the week when she caught the sound of heated, friendly debate in the outer office.

Straightening, she pressed her fists into the small of her back with a small groan, then turned off her recorder.

"--- you can possibly defend that crass travesty of a film, Nick," Alex was saying as he and Nick came into her office. "All right, I'll admit that F. Murray Abraham deserved his Oscar, but as for the rest of it ... come on!"

"All I'm saying -- hi, Nat --"

"Yeah, hi Nat."

"All I'm saying," continued Nick, "is that you're geting hung up on minutiae of historical detail which ultimately are irrelevant. You have to look at the big picture, at the overall effect and I'm telling you, they got it right. Wulfi --"

"Wulfi? Oh, yeah, like you were on first name terms with the guy, I suppose," scoffed Alex.

"*Mozart*, all musical genius aside, was a common, vulgar little man with the tact and interpersonal sensitivity of a warthog," Nick said.

"Who cares?" Alex demanded. "He wrote music like an angel."

"Yeah, and he slobbered into his soup and spat crumbs all over the table," Nick countered.

"Where the hell did you get *that* from?" said Alex.

Nick carefully avoided Natalie's eye. "I read it somewhere. Nat, is the Johnson report done yet? Stonetree's anxious to wrap the case up; the mayor's been making his life a misery."

"Finished it an hour ago," said Natalie, and handed him a neatly lettered manila folder.

"And?"

"And if it was murder, I'm a monkey's uncle. And I'm not. He died of a coronary, plain and simple. Whether she likes it or not, the daughter is going to have to share the inheritance with the stepmother. And that's that."

Nick sighed. "I love a happy ending."

Natalie grinned. "Don't we all."

Grace came in, carrying a pile of folders. On seeing Nick, she executed a few steps of foxtrot, and smiled meaningfully.

"Oh, Grace!" Natalie said, half amused, half exasperated. They'd already had several discussions about who was and wasn't going to the ball. Grace had made many pointed references to Nick. Had urged her to practice what she preached, act like the liberated woman that she was, and damn well ask him since he was playing hard to get.

No way. If he didn't ask her it meant that he wasn't keen on the idea of mixing it with that many mortals. Or had better things to do with this time. Or didn't want to take her. No way was she going to ask him, and risk making both of them feel awkward. Things were difficult enough as it was.

"Oh Grace nothing," said Grace. "Besides, it's in a good cause. All those poor people in Rwanda. Or Ethiopia. Or wherever. It'll be fun, christening that new entertainment centre. All you people work too hard. There's more to life than Eau de Formaldehyde and Brut .357."

Alex said, "I'd kind of like to go, but I don't know anyone well enough yet to ask."

Grace smiled. "You know Natalie. And I know for a fact that no-one" -- she shot a look at Nick -- "has asked her yet."

Natalie said, "Grace! Alex, look --"

"Grace," said Alex, "that's a wonderful idea. Natalie, would you take pity on the new kid in town? Brighten his lonely existence? Rescue him from becoming Cinderfella? Would you, could you, accept his invitation to the ball?"

Natalie looked at him. Ignored Nick, who was staring at The floor, clearly wishing he was anywhere else but here. Promised herself that she would lynch Grace as soon as they were alone.

Grace said, "Well, I've got work to do. See you all later." Triumphant, she departed.

"I can dance," said Alex. "My mother had visions of me turning into the next Fred Astaire."

Natalie laughed. "Really? I was supposed to be the new Shirley Temple."

"Seriously, Natalie. I'd be honoured if you'd be my partner."

She said, "Can I let you know? I'm pretty sure I'm free that night, but sometimes I have a memory like a sieve."

His expression told her he knew she was hedging. Knew, and understood. She liked that.

"Sure," he said easily. "No problem."

The bleep-bleep of a cellular phone broke the moment.

"Mine," said Alex, and pulled it out of his pocket. "Alex Haid. Yeah. Oh, right. You're serious? Hey, that's fantastic. Wait a minute – wait, no, this call's gonna drop out any second. Let me get outside." He looked at Nick, mouthed 'two minutes' at him, and hurried out of Natalie's office before he lost the call.

Nick leaned his hip against a convenient cupboard and said, "You should go to the dance. You don't get out enough."

"Neither do you."

A fraught pause. He looked away. Said, "It'd get Schanke's match making in-laws off your back."

Natalie cleared her throat. "Speaking of Schanke ..."

His expression altered and hands came up in self defence as he turned away. "I know, I know. Stonetree's already had a go at me once this evening. I don't need a lecture from you too."

"His feelings are hurt, Nick," Natalie pointed out. "It's been a week. He doesn't understand why you're avoiding him."

"You know why."

"What does that have to do with the price of fish? What I know, or don't know, isn't the point."

"All right, all right," he said irritably.

"It's not all right, Nick. I'm running out of excuses for you."

He snapped around to face her. "I never asked you to make excuses for me!"

She met his angry eyes without flinching. "Somebody has to."

Alex clattered back into the office. "Hey, guys, I --" He stopped. Looked from one to the other. "Sorry. Didn't mean to interrupt."

"You're not interrupting anything," Nick said. "I was just coming out to get you."

"Oh. Right. Listen, I've got a gig. Saturday night."

Nick stared blankly at him. "A gig?"

"Where?" said Natalie.

"The Nook. It's a basement musician's club on Powell."

"I know it." Natalie was impressed. "You must really be good, Alex. I haven't been to The Nook in ages. Want a fan club?

"Sure."

"Well, I'm free Saturday night and Nick, if Alex is free then you're free."

"I might not be," said Nick.

"Coward."

They stared at each other. He raised his eyebrows. She said, "Oh, come on."

Alex said, "Hey. It's no big deal."

"Yes, it is," said Natalie. "We'll be there." She frowned at Nick. "I'll pick you up, just in case you fall asleep in front of the television."

Nick just looked at her. "We're out of here."

She said, "Don't forget --"

"Nat --" he began. Then stopped. "I'll go tonight."

As Nick pulled into the road Alex said, "So where to now?"

"The hospital."

"Bit late for visiting, isn't it? Don'll be asleep."

"Maybe."

Alex shrugged. "Whatever you say."

They completed the short trip in silence. As Nick switched off the ignition, Alex said, "Want me to stay here?"

"Yeah. Don't let anyone steal the Caddy. I won't be long."

They'd moved Schanke out of ICU the previous week, and into his own room. Nick found the listing at the nurse's station, then looked up and down the corridor for a uniform.

"Can I help you?" a young voice asked from behind him. He turned. A nurse, chart in hand, was closing a door behind her.

"Ah, yeah, I wanted to see Don Schanke."

"Don't you realise the time? Visiting hours ended ages ago," she said, frowning.

"I know. Look, I'm a colleague of Detective Schanke's and I work the night shift and --"

Her frown cleared. "You're not Detective Knight by any chance, are you?"

Nick blinked. "Yes."

"Mr Schanke's mentioned you. He's really been looking forward to seeing you. I shouldn't really let you anywhere near him at this time of night, but --" She glanced up and down the corridor. "I won't tell if you won't. Sister's on her coffee break. Leave the light off in his room so no-one knows you're there -- you won't be able to see him, but --"

"That won't matter. I really appreciate it --" Nick glanced at her name tag. "-- Nurse Halloran. And I won't tell a soul."

She grinned and pointed behind him. "Back down that way, fourth door on your left after the fire extinguisher."

"Thank you."

"My pleasure."

He glided through the darkened private room and lowered himself into the visitor's arm chair by the bed. The air buzzed with Schanke's soft snoring. Bereft of shirt and tie and clashing jacket, rendered juvenile by the cheap, round necked hospital gown, Schanke looked almost a stranger. Nick stared at the bare throat, and couldn't imagine ever wanting to pierce the vulnerable flesh with his fangs. He must have been mad.

Schanke muttered something, and shifted beneath the light hospital blankets. Shadows of discomfort flitted across his face. Muttered again, the fingers of his unsupported hand plucking at the turned over sheet top.

Distinctly he said, "No, Jenny, two helpings is enough. Think of the poor starving kids in Ethiopia and don't be greedy."

This, from the resident departmental doughnut inhaler. Nick swallowed a snort of laughter. Parenthood makes hypocrites of us all.

Or so he'd been told.

The minutes slid by. Schanke grew progressively more restless. Nick was about to call Nurse Halloran when his partner heaved a deep sigh and opened his eyes.

"Shit," he said, the rough voice laced with pain and weariness. "God damn it all to hell." He shifted on his bank of pillows, and froze. "Who's that?" His good arm fumbled for the bedside lamp.

Nick reached out and held the warm wrist in his fingers. "It's me, Schanke."

"Knight?" Schanke lifted his head to glare into the darkness. "Jesus, your hands always feel like you've just pulled them out of the deep freeze. Why are you sitting in the pitch black?"

"I didn't want to disturb you. Besides, I'm not supposed to be here, so keep your voice down."

"Yeah, I've noticed how you didn't want to disturb me," Schanke retorted, pulling his wrist free and obediently lowering his voice. "You know, I had this really great little speech worked out, a thank you for saving my life and all that, but it's been so long now I guess I forgot it."

"Schanke ..."

"The guys tell me you've teamed up with a new partner, some young hot shot from Vancouver. I guess that makes a nice change, huh, no cigarette smoke in your face, no garlic fumes stinking up your precious Caddy."

The darkness was a blessing. Nick concentrated on keeping his voice steady and said, "Schanke. I'm sorry. If I hurt you, I -"

"Hurt?" There was a world of amazement in Schanke's voice. "Who's hurt? Let me tell you something, Knight, all that Starsky and Hutch stuff is just so much crapola. You work with a guy, what does it mean? It means you work with him. You're not married, you're not each other's best, bosom buddies. You just work together. End of story."

In the room, silence. Nick distracted himself with sounds of hospital night life and a hundred different conversations. *I think Dr Jennings is so cute are you sure? Forty milligrams seems like an awful lot of sorry, Mrs Carpenter, we did everything we could but it's a girl, Lindy, we got ourselves baby clear! clear! no response, let's zap him again oh God, don't let her die, please don't let her die, what will I --*

"Knight! I asked you if -- hey, are you listening to me?" Schanke demanded irritably.

"Sure, Schanke."

"*Sure Schanke*, " Schanke mimicked. "You are so full of shit, you know that?"

Nick closed his eyes. In eight hundred years, he must have learned more than how to hurt people. LaCroix could not have been his only teacher.

He owed Schanke ... many things. He said, "I haven't been to see you because I felt guilty."

"Guilty?" Schanke's voice was vastly surprised. "For Christ's sake, what have you got to feel guilty about? Apart from leaving me here all this time without so much as a hi, Don, how you doing? that is."

"If I'd gone into the store with you --"

"You'd have been plugged as well, and then where would we have been? Anyway, why would you come into the store? You never eat anything. Come on, Nick. You can't seriously be blaming yourself because I got shot? That's crazy. You saved my bacon, partner. The kiss of life, and all that. I never would have made it if --"

Perfect recall assaulted him. *The blood and the hunger and the need.* Nick shifted in the chair.

"-- so I don't wanna hear any more garbage like that, okay?" Schanke demanded.

"Okay," said Nick.

Schanke relaxed against his pillows with a groan. "Good."

"So. We got the guy who shot you."

"I know. Stonetree said. That was good work. I really appreciate it."

"He's entered a plea of not guilty, so we'll be going to trial. Earliest court date we could get is four weeks from now."

Schanke nodded. "Yeah. The Crown Prosecutor was in this morning. Taping my testimony."

"Right."

"I'd rather be there, you know, but ... doesn't look like I'm going anywhere for a while."

"No."

A small silence. The sure, steady thump of Schanke's heart filled the room.

"So this new guy. Haid. He all right?"

"Yeah."

"I mean, he knows his stuff, right? Understands about partners."

Patiently, Nick said, "He's a good cop, Schanke. Stonetree wouldn't have him if he wasn't."

"Yeah, yeah. I know," said Schanke. Then he sighed, half groaning. "Sonofabitch. You never been shot, have you?"

"No."

Another silence. Schanke shifted restlessly against his pillows.

Nick said, "I was stabbed, once." *The saracen blade, slicing the attenutated desert air. Shock, as tempered steel divided his flesh. The delusion of immortality, drowning in his flooding blood. The hot pain. The fevered nights. The fear.*

"Bad?"

"I nearly died."

"Scarey shit, eh," said Schanke.

"Yeah."

Schanke's good hand toyed with the edge of the hospital blanket. "Lying there. You know, in the store. All I could think of was Myra, and the look on her face when they told her. And Jenny. I don't want to die, Nick. I like my life. I like living. I don't want to give that up."

"I know," said Nick.

"We talked. Me and Myra. About me quitting."

Nick closed his eyes. "And?"

"I don't want to. I mean, apart from anything else, what else am I gonna do? I been a cop all my life. Myra says she understands, but I'm not sure she does."

"Would you like me to talk to her?"

"There's nothing you could say that hasn't been said already. But I appreciate the offer."

There was an undercurrent of strain in Schanke's voice, and his pulse was thrumming more swiftly. "Any time," said Nick, and stood. "Look, I'd better make a move. It's late, and you're tired, and Alex is waiting in the car. Is there anything you want, anything I can bring you?"

Schanke tried to laugh, and caught his breath. "Everything I want I can't have. I'm still on liquids, and they won't let me smoke. You know what Myra said the other day? She said that if that punk is responsible for me giving up cigarettes, she'd ask the judge to take two years off his sentence. Can you believe that?"

Nick grinned. "What about books? Magazines?"

"Nah, Myra's brought me in a whole heap of stuff. Mostly I just lie here and watch the tube. I can't decide whether it's better to see For Love Alone six hours early, or catch up with it on tape so's I can fast forward through the ads."

"You're a resourceful man, Schank. I'm sure you'll figure it out. You take care of yourself. I'll see you around."

"I'd better. And Knight --" Nick turned back. "If you see one of the nurses, ask 'em to stop in, would you?"

Nick frowned. Stepped back to the bed and turned on the night lamp. A fine sheen of sweat glossed Schanke's forehead, and his lips were pinched with pain.

Shamefaced, Schanke attempted a one shouldered shrug. "What can I say?" he muttered. "Even Superman had kryptonite, right?"

Nick smiled. "Schanke, look at me." Schanke unscrewed his eyes and looked up. Nick sat on the edge of the hospital bed and rested one hand beside the pillows. "We can do this without the medication. Just take a deep breath and relax."

"What --"

"Shh," said Nick. He focussed his will. Schanke's swift heart beat boomed in his head. "You feel no pain. You'll go back to sleep without any trouble, and you'll stay asleep till morning."

"No pain," murmured Schanke, eyelids fluttering.

"And you won't want a cigarette when you wake up, either."

"No pain," Schanke sighed. The muscles of his face slackened, and he slept.

Nick reached over, killed the light, and went back to the car.

"Don okay?" asked Alex, as they left the hospital car park.

"He's fine," said Nick.

"You okay?'

"I'm fine too."

Hesitantly Alex said, "It's just I know, sometimes, it's easy to blame yourself if something happens to someone you care about . You think there must be something you could have done to stop it. May not be true. But you think it."

"I'm fine," Nick repeated. "I thought we'd head back to the docks. I want another look at where they found that dealer."

"Zabriskie?" said Alex. "Sure. Whatever you say."

Nick's face, underlit by the dashboard lights, strobed with shadows from the street, was inscrutable.

Alex sighed, and hummed a Bach cantata to himself, very softly, under his breath.

"Hi, Natalie."

Natalie, dropping off evidence for McRead and Estevez, turned as she heard her name. "Hi, Alex. Are you still here? I thought your shift ended ages ago."

Alex shrugged. "Yeah, well, I had some loose ends to tie up."

She grinned. "Careful. Nick's workaholism could be contagious."

"I wouldn't mind if it brought his kind of arrest record," said Alex ruefully. "What does he do? Hypnotise the perps into confessing?"

She stared at him. "Close. But I wouldn't go letting yourself get intimidated. Nick's ... one of a kind."

"I'm beginning to see that."

"How's it going, anyway?"

"With Nick?" She nodded. He shrugged. "Okay, I think. He's pretty hard to get a handle on, isn't he? Very reserved."

"It can take a while to get to know him," Natalie agreed. "But he's good people, Alex."

"Oh, yeah, absolutely," Alex said hastily. "Don't ge me wrong, I like the guy."

Smiling, she said, "Give it time, Alex. Schanke being shot shook him pretty badly."

"Yeah. I can imagine," said Alex. He hesitated. "Look, I was just about to call it a night. Or morning. Whatever. Would you care to join me for coffee and a Danish?"

Natalie considered. This was her last evidence drop for the shift. She wasn't due anywhere but home now. Dinner had been a long time ago. Her stomach rumbled co-operatively.

"I'd like that," she said. "Thanks."

He smiled. "Great. Everyone says that Barney's down the street is the place to go for coffee and Danish. I'll just grab my coat."

The all night cafe was a favourite law enforcement retreat. Several of the tables were occupied by faces ranging from well known to only vaguely familiar. A waitress, clad in blue jeans and a sleeveless pink cotton top, lounged behind the counter making coffee. Natalie waved and smiled at the people she recognised as she slid opposite Alex and relaxed against the booth's padded upholstery with a sigh.

"Long shift?" he asked sympathetically.

She nodded. "I think I'm going to petition the Mayor to adopt a criminal quota system. At least that way I could organise my time a bit better."

"Like Ankh-Morpork?" Alex suggested.

Natalie looked at him. She could feel a smile spreading over her face. "You like Terry Pratchett?"

Alex said, "I buy Terry Pratchett in hard cover."

"Wow," said Natalie. "Love, twue love."

"Can I take your order, guys?" said the waitress, wandering over from delivering coffee cups to other night owls.

"Bluberry Danish and a flat white, please," said Natalie.

"Sounds good to me," said Alex. "Make that two."

"Sure," said the waitress, and withdrew.

Alex said, "You realise, of course, that there are only two kinds of people in this world. The ones who like Pratchett, and the ones who don't."

Grinning, Natalie said, "Very true. I loaned Nick *Wyrd Sisters*. He gave it back to me and said, 'Next time put in little yellow stickers where I'm suppposed to laugh, would you?'"

Alex chuckled. "Phillistine."

"So," said Natalie, as the waitress delivered their order. "How are you liking Toronto?"

Alex stirred sugar into his coffee. "It's different. I like it. Moving's always a bitch, but I'm sorting myself out gradually."

"Do you have any family here?"

He shook his head. "No."

"That's hard," said Natalie. "You must miss them."

"There's only my sister, really," said Alex. "And you're right, I miss her a lot. We're pretty tight. It actually feels kind of funny, living alone."

"You lived with your sister?" Natalie asked, carefully neutral.

Alex's expression was wry. "I know, I know how it looks. Victorian. Brother works, sister keeps house. It wasn't like that. Heidi's office manager for a big firm of corporate lawyers. Makes nearly twice as much as I do."

"I'm sorry," said Natalie. "I didn't mean to imply anything."

"It's okay," Alex reassured her. "We'd kind of come to the same conclusion ourselves. Realised we'd outgrown the need to be together." He hesitated. "We had a family tragedy. Our lives were ... wrecked. I suppose, in a way, it was a reversion to childhood. We just clung to what we had left, which was us."

"I'm sorry, " said Natalie.

Toying with his teaspoon, eyes down, he said, "My niece. Heidi's daughter. She was abducted and murdered."

"Oh, Alex." Natalie closed her fingers over his hand. "I am so sorry."

His expression was curious. "You understand, don't you?" he said slowly. "Who was it?"

"My brother," said Natalie.

In silence they stared at one another, as their coffees cooled and the edges of their pastries curled.

Eventually, Alex said, "How long ago?"

"Fifteen months."

His fingers curved about her wrist. "It's the ultimate crime," he said. "Of all the pains this world can inflict, murder is the most intimate. The most violating."

Natalie took a deep, shuddering breath. "The cruellest."

Outside, cars were beginning to cruise up and down the street. The morning rush hour was gathering momentum.

She said, "It's strange. I spend my life with murder. I know how it looks, how it smells, how it feels under my hands. I know its shapes and its textures. I don't think it has a mask I haven't met yet. But none of that, none of my experience, prepared me for Richard. For all the good it did me I might as well be a librarian." She glanced away. "Even now, after all these months, I'll see a movie or read a book and I'll think, gee, I have to tell Ritchie about this ... " She faltered. Summoned a smile. "That's hard."

"Yeah," Alex said quietly. "I see kids in the street. Teenagers the age Molly would be now. Laughing. Living. And the hatred I feel for the man who —" He shook his head. "I try to be a good Christian, you know? But turning the other cheek to a child killer is more than I can manage."

"Are you supposed to?"

With a shrug, Alex said, "The general idea is hate the sin, not the sinner. I thought I was pretty good at that, once. But now ... I don't know. Maybe it's being a cop. Maybe I've got hardened and bitter and cynical. But murder is the proverbial stone in a pond. The ripples spread and destroy everything they touch."

"I know," said Natalie. "You find yourself saying things, doing things, you never dreamed you could be capable of. You go a little crazy. And you're so alone."

"So angry," Alex added, quietly. "Because there's a whole system out there geared towards helping the criminals and not the victims. Somehow we've lost the plot. We're supposed to feel sorry for these animals, who take life on a whim and leave the families behind in agony for the rest of their days. There are no excuses for murder."

Natalie hesitated. "Not excuses, no. Reasons, maybe. Circumstances. Life isn't cut and dried."

"No," said Alex. "You're right. It's not. But in the end, we all have a choice. To kill, or not to kill. It's that simple."

"Is it?" Natalie wondered. "You make it sound easy."

He smiled. "It is." His fingers, still holding her wrist, tightened briefly then released her. He reached for his coffee, took a mouthful and grimaced. "Yech. Why is it that we'll happily drink piping hot coffee, or icy cold coffee, but heave over anything in between the two?"

Natalie laughed. "You know, I'm really looking forward to Saturday night. I haven't been to The Nook for, oh, months."

"I haven't played a gig in a while, either. I've missed it," Alex said. "And I'm really glad that you'll be there."

Another, warmer silence. Natalie watched her fingers trace a pattern on the table top. Glancing up, she surprised a look in Alex's eyes that stilled her hand. His fingers came to rest, lightly, on hers.

"Come to the ball with me," he said. "Please."

"Yes," said Natalie. "Yes, I will."

The Nook was one of those small, fuggy places redolent of1950's intellecutal watering holes. Settling into her chair, Natalie reached into the bowl of peanuts on the middle of the table. "Great place, huh?" she said to Nick, then wrinkled her nose. "Except that I'm going to have to dry clean everything, including my hair, to get rid of the smell."

Nick looked about the dimly lit basement music club, and the forty or so other patrons who were all munching peanuts, drinking wine or beer or coffee, waving scarlet tipped cigarettes for emphasis and laughing, scowling, arguing or mooning at each other over the small round tables that spread out from the central stage.

"Great," he agreed. "It's a lot like the Marxist clubs in London during the Thirties."

Natalie chewed, swallowed. "Does everything always remind you of something else?"

He shrugged. "The more things change --"

"I know, I know, and there's nothing new under the sun," she retorted.

He sat back in his chair. "What am I doing here, Nat?"

She trickled a few more peanuts into her mouth, chewed happily, and swallowed. "You're having a night out, Nick. You're having fun."

"I am?"

"You are," she said firmly. "So. How's it going with Alex?"

"Fine. I think he's got the makings of a good detective. He cares about the work. He's good with the families. Asks the right kinds of questions."

"Nothing's happened to make him suspicious?"

"Of me? Not yet.'

"And when it does?"

"Don't worry. I'm careful." He eyed her speculatively. "Speaking of Alex, how was your date Thursday night?"

She considered him warily. "Date?" Oooh, that bloody grapevine. Someone in Barney's must have blabbed. She was a pretty mean detective herself. She'd find out who it was and --

Nick's expression was dangerously innocent. "Yeah, date. With Alex."

Peanuts, peanuts. She needed more peanuts. "It wasn't a date. It was a coincidence," she said carelessly. "He was coming off shift and I was dropping off some test results for Harry on my way home. We had a coffee down the road, that's all. Big deal."

"Some coincidence," scoffed Nick. "Harry mentioned you were bringing in the results, and Alex's shift ended half an hour before you got there."

"Be quiet," said Natalie. "It's starting."

A curtain at the rear of the room swished aside, and there was an enthusiastic splattering of applause as a man and a woman, each carrying a saxaphone, headed to the stage, which was laden with two pianos, microphones and stools.

Over the encouraging yells from the audience, Natalie said, "Terrific! I love sax!"

Nick looked at her.

"You know very well what I just said," Natalie told him, refusing to acknowledge the warm rush of blood to her cheeks.

Nick grinned, and said nothing.

Mellow blues seeped into the far corners of the room. Hands drifted with the beat, bodies swayed. The sax players finished their first set, and took a short break.

"This is great, isn't it," demanded Natalie, digging her finger into Nick's side. "Tell me you're miserable. I bet you can't, can you?" She reached for the peanut bowl again, triumphant.

"We used to go out a lot," Nick said.

Natalie glanced at him sidelong. "You and Janette?"

"And LaCroix."

She nearly bit her tongue. He hadn't mentioned his master since the night they'd fought, and he'd killed him. Had refused to discuss the act or its implications. The memory of his anguish, which she only dimly understood, caught at her still. If he was prepared to reminisce, then perhaps the wounds were finally healing.

Elaborately casual around a mouthful of peanut she said, "Go out where?"

"The ballet. The opera. Symphonies. He was passionate about music. I think it was the only thing he ever loved."

She decided to be reckless. "He loved you. And Janette."

Nick shook his head. "No. That was never love."

Natalie reached for her soft drink and gurgled through the straw. "I'll get you a refill," said Nick. She watched him thread his way between the tables. It was hard to imagine him dressed for a night at the opera. Top hat and tails and a boiled shirt. Far too stiff and formal for a man who lived in silk.

"Here you are," he said, returning, and handed her a glass of wine.

"Why thank you, kind sir." She sipped. "Not bad. So. Do you miss them?"

"Miss what?"

"You know. The opera and stuff. You don't go any more, do you?"

Seated again, he shook his head. "I miss the ballet," he admitted at last. A memory spasmed across his face.

She leaned into his shoulder for a moment. "Then go. There's more to life than the night shift, Nick."

The saxophonists were playing again. In silence they listened, and when the music finished they joined in the enthusiastic applause. The next performer played the piano and sang folk songs. She had a clear, high voice that raised the hairs on Natalie's neck. Natalie consulted the program.

"Alex is next." She toyed with her empty wine glass.

"More?" asked Nick.

"No, thanks. I'll be giggling myself under the table."

"That might be entertaining."

She shook her head. "Strictly a private performance."

"It isn't good to drink alone," Nick pointed out.

She stared at him. "Look who's talking."

Before he could comment, a short, portly man with flowing beard and a paisley cravat came out from behind the curtain and took the stage.

"Welcome, one and all, to The Nook!" he announced, spreading his arms wide. His accent was plumply British, echoing with privilege and a public school education. No one seemed to mind. There were shouts, whistles, stamping feet. "Are you having a good time?" More delighted outcry. "For those of you who have graced us with your presence for the first time, allow me to introduce myself. Freddie Partridge, Esquire, your humble host."

Natalie leaned close to Nick and said, "He kills me, this guy. Humble is the last word you'd use, believe me."

"I do," said Nick. Freddie Partridge wasn't a person, he was an archetype. Place him on any stage, in any costume, any century, and nothing would change.

Freddie said, "Folks, if you've read your programs, and you come here regularly, you'll notice a new name on the list. Alex Haid. Hails from Vancouver. This is his first time at The Nook, so give him a warm welcome. I think you'll be seeing a lot of him."

Polite applause, this time. Freddie retreated, the curtain was pulled back, and Alex, carrying a classical guitar, took the stage. Settling onto a stool, he positioned the guitar on his raised thigh. Head bent, his expression grave but tender, he put his fingers to the strings.

Murmured conversations ceased. Clasping the guitar like a lover within the vulnerable curve of wrist and spine, Alex released the rippling music. Freed it to wash through the low ceilinged room like the rising rivers of spring.

Natalie felt herself melt, boneless, into her chair. Seduced. Reduced to ears and eyes and nerve endings. The music closed over her head and unresisting she sank beneath its surface. Surrendered her hard won autonomy without a moment's thought, and gloried in her subjection.

Too soon, it ended. Applause crashed about them. Bereft of words she turned to Nick.

"Paganini," he said. He wasn't clapping. Beneath his smile was something else, something she would have to think about later. At home, at peace, where she could subdue emotion and rediscover intellect.

"What about Paganini?" she said.

"That piece. Nicolo composed it."

Nicolo. She sighed. "And I suppose you were the best of friends, right?"

He shook his head. "I didn't know Paganini," he said. Looked at her sideways. "Knew his cousin, though."

She hit him.

"Ouch," said Nick, and rubbed his arm.

At last the applause died down, and the next performer came out. Beneath jazz piano, Nick said, "Alex is very good."

"He's better than good," said Natalie. "I had no idea ..."

Nick shifted in his chair. "You like him, don't you?"

"Don't you?" she countered.

"That isn't an answer."

She felt her face heat. Had to glance away from his considering eyes.

"Nat ... I told you once that I would never get in the way of your happiness," he said quietly. "That promise still stands."

She cleared her throat. "I hardly know him."

"That's not an answer either."

Suddenly, breathing hurt. "Is that what you want?"

"Your happiness is all I've ever wanted."

Which didn't answer her. It was also the only answer she was going to get. One day, they were going to have to stop skirting the issue.

Oneday.

Alex arrived. "Well?" he said in a low voice, pulling up a spare chair.

Natalie smiled, tremulously. "It was wonderful Fantastic."

His face lit up. "Really? You enjoyed it?" He glanced at Nick.

"Like Natalie said," Nick agreed. "Very impressive."

"I'm glad," said Alex.

"What did Freddie think?" Natalie asked.

Alex smiled. "He wants me to call him tomorrow, to discuss a regular spot. I don't know if that'll work out, with the job, but I'd like to give it a try, at least."

The jazz pianist finished. Applauding, Natalie laughed. "You must." The lights came up: it was interval. She stood. "Now if you'll excuse me for a moment, I'm going to make a run for the ladies' before everyone else gets there."

Nick and Alex shifted their chairs back to let her out. Alex watched her for a moment, then said, "She's something, isn't she?"

"One of a kind," Nick agreed.

"Yeah." Alex looked at the floor, then up again. "This charity ball thing. She's said she'll come with me. It's not going to tread on any toes?"

Nick shrugged. "I have no idea. Nat's pretty popular around the precinct."

"I meant your toes," Alex amended.

"Alex, I don't know what you think, or even what you've been told, but Nat and I are just good friends."

"You're sure? Because I wouldn't want to --"

"I'm sure. Really."

Alex sat back, relieved. "Good. But I still think you should come to the ball, Cinderella. All work and no play, you know. You should ask that friend of yours from the night club. Janette? We could make it a foursome."

Nick almost laughed aloud. Janette, making polite conversation with mortals? "I don't think so," he said. "She's not much for socialising. Besides, she has a business to run."

"Your decision," said Alex, and shook his head. "God, I was so nervous out there. Thought I was going to drop my guitar."

"No one would have known."

"Good."

Curious, Nick said, "Why did you give it up? Professionally, I mean. Why become a cop?"

Alex frowned. "I used music as an escape, after I left the seminary. In the end it suffered because of that. Too much unfinished business getting in the way. And I became a cop because ..." He hesitated. "Because a pair of handcuffs does more to stop a criminal than a sermon."

"But a sermon can save a soul," Nick said.

"Handcuffs can save a life," countered Alex.

Nick looked into the distance. "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his soul?"

Alex snorted. "You don't sound so lapsed to me. Look, I know what you're saying. And trust me, you're not the first person to have said it. All I know is that as a cop, I'm making a difference."

"And you wouldn't have, as a priest?"

"I don't know how much difference any priest makes," said Alex, and smiled. "Here comes Natalie."

Nick stood as she joined them. "I think I'm going to call it a night," he announced. "There are one or two things I want to check into about the Henderson woman's statement."

"But, Nick, it's your night off," Natalie protested. "Can't you let it alone, just this once?"

"No. A couple of things she said are bugging me. I want to check them out."

"Workaholism doesn't begin to describe it," Alex said to Natalie.

"You said it," she agreed, and looked at Nick."I'll run you across to the precinct house, then."

"That's okay." Nick touched her shoulder. "Stay here. Enjoy the rest of the evening. I'll make my own way to the precinct."

Her eyebrows lowered. "Nick ..."

"The exercise will do me good," he said lightly, and didn't quite meet her disapproving eyes.

At the base of the stairs leading up to the street he turned. Natalie and Alex were sitting side by side, laughing over some shared joke. They looked ... good, together. Right

They'd look good dancing together, too. And Alex, holding her close, perhaps resting his cheek against hers, would be distracted only by the perfume on her skin, and not beneath it. Would hear nothing but the lilt of her laughter. Desire nothing, save the simple complications of human touch.

He ran up the stairs.

Outside, he ducked down a deserted alley, made sure no one could see him, and rose between the grimy, graffitied walls into the clear night sky.

There was no proof for Natalie's vehement assertion that flying, like drinking blood, kept him from mortality. He liked flying. Remembered vividly the first time, the incredulous, elated laughter that had burst from him as the mortal world fell away beneath him and his cold face, turned into the colder wind, braved the slipstreams of the night.

LaCroix had soared beside him, silver tipped in the moonlight. *"See, my Nicholas, see the wonderful gift I have given you? Do you understand, now? How can you mourn your mortality when I have given you this in its place?"*

He hadn't. Not then, flying. Not since the first horror, swiftly buried. Labelled dog, he'd decided to bark. And bark, and bark, and bark. Guilt, implacable as a glacier, had come much later.

The lights of Toronto dazzled beneath him like an inverted sky. Despite everything, he laughed. Free of gravity, of hunger, and the weariness of striving to succeed in a mortal world, he rolled through the liquid air.

The image of Natalie, smiling at Alex, drowned.

An hour and a half after beginning his re-examination of Jane Henderson's statement, he had the inklings of a proveable theory, and a gut instinct that told him he was right. One of the night patrolmen, passing his desk, said, "You look like the cat who caught the canary."

Nick smiled. "More like the cop who caught the killer." He scribbled a series of questions and facts, times and places to be checked, and left them for Webber and Grey to follow up next shift. Then he headed for The Raven.

Janette smiled when she saw him. "*Cheri.*"

She tasted of blood and wine. "Dance with me," he growled, and touched his teeth to the skin of her throat.

"You are in a good mood this evening," Janette observed, pressed thigh to thigh against him, her fingers dawdling through his hair. "*Et pourquoi?*"

"I caught a murderer tonight."

"Oh, is that all?" she asked, and yawned.

He smacked her behind, lightly. "It was good work. Be happy for me."

"I'm ecstatic, darling," she said. Her cheek lay against his. "You've been flying."

"Yes.'

"That won't please your little mortal friend."

He pulled back slightly, met her mocking eyes. "It pleases me."

"*O la ?*" she said, and kissed him.

Buoyed by the music and the sweaty press of bodies around them, they danced. Memories drifted to the surface.

"Do you remember the ball at Fontainbleu?" he said idly, his hand roving the bare skin between her shoulder blades. "The Dauphin's Christmas ball, I mean." He felt her laugh.

"How could I forget? The Duke of Normandy and Baron Lipsky fought a duel over who would dance with me first. Lipsky won. A pity. The Duke was by far the better dancer."

"Do you miss those days?"

She shrugged. "They were diverting."

"*Les beaux jeune hommes.*"

"There are always beautiful young men, Nicola."

Natalie, drinking in the music. Close enough to touch. To hold.

His finger traced the elegant line of Janette's jaw. "How would you like to be diverted, one last time?"

She frowned at him. "What do you mean?"

"Would you like to dance at a ball again? Drive all the young men wild with your beauty?"

He watched her consider the notion.

"*Serieusement?*" she said at last.

"*Mais certainement.*"

"Ah, Nicola, you spoil me."

He smiled, and nipped the lobe of her ear. "That's a yes?"

She nipped him back. "*Mais certainement.*"

The next night, Sunday, Alex pulled his car into the courtyard and looked at the outside of 101 Gateway. It was a warehouse. Or at least, a converted warehouse, sitting in the middle of a street full of derelict warehouses. The whole neighbourhood reeked of solitude and isolation. Now, in the monochrome light, the looming, broken windowed buildings all around him were vaguely menacing. He cut the ignition and got out of the car.

Only Friday Nick had told him, *Look at everything, Alex. Everything you notice about a person tells you who they are.* If that were true, then what did Nick's choice of location say about him? Surely only someone who was profoundly alienated in some way chose to live like this. Alone. Surrounded by abandoned buildings. Barricaded behind faceless brick walls, guarded zealously by cameras.

He pressed the intercom button. "It's me, Nick."

The door clicked open. He pushed it aside, stepped into the elevator. When it ground to a halt, he pulled the door wide. Nick paced the apartment floor, cellular phone pressed to his ear.

"Look," he was saying. "I don't care that it's Sunday night. I don't care that you're watching the game. I don't even care what this is going to cost me. Just get over here and fix my car. Please."

Alex grinned, and sketched a wave. Nick nodded back, listening. "No, no, you're not listening to me. This is not a piece of Japanese junk, this is a 1962 Cadillac. In mint condition. And I am a law enforcement officer who relies on this vehicle to get the job done. Are you getting the picture now?"

As Nick continued to argue with whoever it was, a mechanic, presumably, Alex looked around the warehouse.

It was clean. Impeccably neat. Airy. Cold. Dark, despite the white paint here and there. Black furniture. Rugs, no carpet. Paintings, books, cds, some quality artefacts. In one corner, a motorbike. Did he ever ride it? There was also, surprisingly, a table crowded with paints and brushes. An easel, supporting a work in progress. Something abstract. Bright as a sunburst. Over all the place felt lived in, but somehow untouched. Outwardly welcoming, ultimately distanced.

Which said it all, really.

His eye was drawn to a warm splash of colour balanced against one wall.

More paintings. The same kind as the one on the easel. Unframed. He went to investigate. And was struck dumb.

Not all of the canvases were abstract. Or bright. The contrast, the contradiction, between the art and the artist was like the crash of music in a silent hall.

Behind the cool reserve, the guarded eyes, the reticent conversation he was coming to accept as Nick's impersonal response to the world lay ... chaos. A cacophany of rage and despair and hope and violence and need, united in one long, silent shriek.

Very carefully, Alex rested the canvases back against the wall, and turned to look at Nick.

He was saying, "Thank you. I really appreciate it. How soon can you be here? Fine." He ended the call.

His heart still hammering, Alex said, "These are very ... powerful. Electric."

"Do you mind?" said Nick.

"Why do you?" countered Alex. "Art is supposed to be shared. It's an act of communication."

"Expression. Not necessarily communication." Nick shrugged. "At least not intentionally."

Alex moved away from the paintings. "Do you exhibit?"

"No."

"You should. They're amazing."

"Yeah, well, so is trying to get a mechanic on a Sunday night," said Nick.

"Couldn't it wait?"

"No. It couldn't."

Alex managed a grin. "The guys said you babied that car. They were right."

"That car is an investment."

"A leaky one," said Alex. "You've got oil, or something, all down the front of your shirt."

Nick looked. Cursed. "Give me a minute. The mechanic said he'd be here in ten. Do you mind waiting? I didn't want to leave the keys out in an unlocked garage."

"No problem," said Alex. Nick went upstairs to change his shirt. Alex continued his investigation of the warehouse. An old wooden box sat alone on a coffee table. Bending, he flipped up the lid.

A wooden cross. Polished with handling, clearly old Well, well, well. Curiouser and curiouser, said Alex. Definitely not as lapsed as he liked to make out. He closed the box lid and drifted over to the baby grand piano, which he also hadn't expected. He whistled soundlessly. A Steinway? Who died and left Nick the fortune? The music on the shelf was a piece by Scriabin. A spiky customer at the best of times.

Nick came down the stairs, shrugging a black silk jacket over a fresh grey shirt. Also silk. Alex sat on the piano stool. "Do you mind?" he asked, fingers poised above the silent keys. "I had to leave my upright in Vancouver. Haven't got around to getting another one yet. Moving costs a bomb."

"Go ahead," said Nick, clearly resigned.

Alex nodded. "Thanks." Took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and tried a couple of experimental chords. It was a beautiful piano. Perfectly tuned. The acoustics weren't bad, either.

He began to play properly. Without conscious volition his fingers chose the opening bars of the Moonlight sonata. *Adagio sostenuto (attacca).* Such melancholy. Such sorrow. Had he always thought of the Moonlight like that? Or was it the paintings that now coloured his perception? That imbued the sonata with such pain?

He looked up. Nick had moved to a window. Everything in the music was in his face. It was unbearable.

Mid phrase, Alex leapt into Scott Joplin. The Entertainer. Syncopated lightness, frivolity, gaiety. They were in the paintings too. Somewhere. In a memory, at least. Concentrate on those. Never mind that the mix was unsettled. Mismatched. Just fill the empty space beneath the ceiling with froth and bubble. Banish the dark.

As the last notes faded into silence Alex said, "Amazing, isn't it, how music can affect you. Some ivory, some ebony, some strings and a sound box. Put them all together and you can make a grown man weep. Or laugh. Rejoice. Grow sombre." He smiled. "I've spent hours, trying to work it out. Can't seem to find an answer."

Don't waste your time trying to understand it. Just accept it."

"Accept it," echoed Alex. "I never was one for blindly accepting anything."

"That makes two of us," said Nick. "What else do you play? Apart from guitar and piano?"

Alex picked out Chopsticks, idly, absently. "Organ. Harpsichord. I can manage a tune on the flute, and the clarinet, but they're not really my instruments. You?"

Nick shook his head. "Just the piano. Someone once tried to teach me the violin, but ..."

"Nicholas, Nicholas, you sound as though you're strangling a cat! How many times must I tell you, glide *the bow across the strings, don't saw it like a peasant cutting timber !"*

Alex grinned. "Not a success, huh?"

"I learned other things more successfully," said Nick. The intercom buzzed, and he answered it. "Harvey. Good. I'll be right down."

"The mechanic?" said Alex.

"Time to hit the road."

"Great. On the way in you can explain to me how you picked Jane Henderson as the murderer."

Nick looked up from changing the battery on his phone. "You heard about the arrest."

"Stonetree called me. How the hell did you work it out? I was convinced it was the fiance."

"Think about it," said Nick with a smile. "All the facts are there. It's just in how you look at them."

"What facts?" Alex demanded, exasperated.

"How long she said she spent shopping. The clothes she wears, and how she wears them. Her makeup."

Alex frowned. "I didn't think she wore make up." His expression cleared. "Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Are you tellling me ... the dog that didn't bark in the night?"

Nick nodded. "Precisely, Watson. Come on. We're late."

Hurrying to the elevator, Alex cast a last look over his shoulder at the piano. He'd kill to get more time with it ... but somehow, he didn't think it would happen.

Nothing about Nick's home suggested he kept an open house.

CHAPTER FIVE

Natalie lay her head back and let the feeling rush through her. Her heart pounded, her face glowed. "Come on, Alex! Harder!"

Alex grunted. "Are you kidding? I'm pushing as hard as I can!"

"Wimp."

"Sadist."

She laughed and opened her eyes. The sky swooped over her head, upside down trees and grass and flowers whizzing by. Alex's topsy turvy face flashed into sight and receded. He was puffing.

"Wheeee!" said Natalie. "This is just like flying. "I'd forgotten how much fun it was getting pushed on a swing."

"Yeah, well, I think your time's up," said Alex from behind. "There's a queue of kids here about ready to lynch you and their mothers are ready to call the funny farm."

Natalie sat up and twisted around. "Liar," she said indignantly. "There's one child, singular. Its playing on the slippery dip and its mother looks jealous, if anything."

"What about the ones in the sand pit?"

"Digging their way to China," Natalie said. "Look, if you're tired, all you have to do is say so."

"So," Alex said promptly.

"Ha," said Natalie, and stuck out her feet. Let them skim the dirt lightly, and slow her exhilerating pendulum flight.

Alex came around to flop onto the grass a few feet away.

"So come on, woman. What are we going to wear to the ball? We have to make a decision now, today, because except for Nick every man and his dog is going to this thing, and we won't have a prayer of getting costumes if we don't book them soon."

Natalie, using the toes of one foot to propel herself in a tiny arc, screwed up her face. "Decisions, decisions. Gosh. Well, I don't know. But I can't see myself going as Annie Oakley, if you know what I mean."

Darn," said Alex. "And I was getting all excited about my coon skin cap."

"Huh?"

"Joke, Janice," Alex said patiently. "I think you're right. We should choose simple but elegant."

"How about the Roaring Twenties? I've always been interested in that period."

Alex considered. "Prohibition. The rise of gangsterism. The last big fling before the Depression, and Hitler, and the A bomb. I like your definition of simple elegance."

"Yes, but do you like the idea as well?"

"It's interesting."

"How so?"

He leaned back on his hands, squinting a little in the sunshine. "The Twenties were a lawless, excessive time. I wouldn't choose either of those words to describe you."

Natalie waited, and listened to the squeals of the children in the sand pit, and the bees industriously humming in the flower beds that dotted the park.

Alex grinned. "You're not going to bite, are you? Most women I know would have asked how I'd describe them."

She poked her tongue out at him. "I'm not most women."

"I know. But just in case you're dying to know and too proud to ask, I think you're intelligent and compassionate and stubborn and loyal and unique. I'd add beautiful but you might get offended."

Laughing, Natalie said, "By all means, add beautiful. I'll try to keep my wounded feminist sensibilities to myself." It was impossible not to be pleased. The last person who'd paid her outrageous compliments had been —

Roger.

Alex sat up. "Nat? Is something wrong?"

"No," she said quickly. "Nothing. So are we agreed? We hunt for something twentiesish?"

"Sure. Whatever makes you happy makes me happy."

"Aw, shucks," said Natalie, and pulled a goofy face.

He laughed. "So tell me something. Why the hell won't Nick come to this thing?"

She spread her hands wide. "He's just not one for socialising."

"You're telling me," said Alex. "He doesn't come out for a meal with the rest of us. He doesn't stop by the bar for a drink, even. If he isn't at work it looks like the only place he hangs out, apart from his apartment, is that heavy metal dive. The Crow?"

"The Raven."

"Yeah. The migraine factory. Okay, I can see the attraction there, although for my tastes she's -- " He saw something in her face, and stopped. "Sorry. Look, Natalie --"

She held up her hand. "Alex. I've already told you. Nick and I are just good friends. That's all. We're professional colleagues and we like each other. End of story. As for Janette, well, she and Nick have known each other a long time."

Alex's expression was shrewd. "But you don't like her, do you?"

"I hardly know her."

"I liked you the second I saw you."

She answered his smile with one of her own. This was so nice. Meeting in daytime, having fun in the park under a blue sky and a warm, yellow sun. Spending time with a man who was clearly attracted to her and not afraid of showing it.

In fact, it had all the charm of novelty.

"Likewise," she said softly.

"What are you doing Saturday night?"

She pretended to think. "Oh, gee, I don't know. Washing my hair, darning my socks, cleaning the bathroom ... why?"

"Freddie holds an annual charity night at The Nook, apparently, and this week is it. This year he's raising funds for the Children's Hospital. I thought it might be fun if we got a bunch of people together from the 27th and forensics."

"Sounds good to me," said Natalie. "I really enjoyed the other night. Leave it with me, and I'll see what I can do." She glanced at her watch. "Ouch, is that the time? I am spectacularly late. Grace will be sending out a posse after me."

Alex clambered to his feet and dusted himself off. "I'd better go too. I'm not due on till tonight but I want to fit in some practise at some point today. This has been great. We should do it again some time."

"Any time," said Natalie.

"I'll hold you to that," Alex replied.

Side by side, almost but not quite touching, they walked back to the car park.

The rest of the week was pretty routine. More bodies. Two appearances in court. In between reviewing testimony and weighing body parts she called in some favours, did some shift swapping, twisted a few arms, and got a group together for The Nook's fund raiser. Alex did the same.

It took her an hour to decide what to wear. Her bedroom looked like a shipwreck. The flotsam and jetsam of accessories and shoes and skirts and jackets lay strewn about the floor in an aftermath of indecision.

In the end she decided on black polo neck, black ski pants, black high heels and a jade jacket. She left her hair out.

"Wow," said Alex, when she opened the door to him. "What a knock out." And handed her a single red rose. "For you."

"That's sweet," she said, and kissed his cheek.

"You ready?"

"And raring to go. Just let me put this in water first."

In the car, as she fastened her seatbelt and he started the engine, they looked at one another and said, "I've been thinking -"

Natalie laughed. "You first."

"No, you," said Alex.

"Okay. How would you feel if we went via Nick's place --"

"And dragged him out by the scruff of his neck? Two minds with but a single thought, dear doctor," said Alex. He looked over his shoulder and pulled out into the traffic. "I mean, okay. We've hit a dead end on the Zabriskie killing. Ditto on the warehouse security guard. And nobody saw anything on that driveby shooting, despite the fact that it happened within five blocks of the Eaton Centre in peak hour commuting. But hey, that's part of the job. You just have to learn to live with it."

"I wouldn't point that out to Nick, if I were you."

Alex grinned. "No. He sure gets tetchy when things don't work out the way he wants, doesn't he?"

"The job is important to him. He tends to take murder personally."

"Yeah, well, don't we all," said Alex.

"And he's still upset about Schanke. Having to wait such a long time for that little punk's court case is getting on his nerves."

"So instead of doing the sensible thing, like us, and getting out of the house for an evening, having a laugh with friends --"

Natalie shrugged. "I know. He holes up in that warehouse like a bear, and watches Bela Lugosi films."

Alex choked. "Bela Lugosi? Well, it's different. And I suppose it could be worse. He could drink. A lot of cops do."

Oh, he does that too, thought Natalie. Cabernet Friesian. Nicely chilled.

A single light shone from the windows of Nick's warehouse. Natalie punched in the security code, aware of Alex's immediate curiosity. She didn't comment, and neither did he. The lift took them up, and deposited them into the shadowed spaces of the loft.

A movie flickered on the large television screen. Alex leaned close and said, "I can't tell. Is George Hamilton better than Bela Lugosi, or worse?"

"Better, I think," said Natalie. "But only just." Raising her voice she said, "Nick?"

The movie stopped. In a single, fluid motion he sat up, a wine glass dangling from his fingers.

"Natalie. Alex."

Suddenly she didn't know what to say. It wasn't just them, any more, it was Alex too, and she had to be circumspect, indirect, and that felt strange. Especially here, where so much naked truth had been told.

Alex said, "We're here to change your mind. You need to get out."

"I don't want to change my mind."

"Please, Nick?" said Natalie. "It won't be the same if you're not there." She crossed to the arm of the sofa and sat down.

He looked so tired. Had been forcing himself to function throughout the day as well as all night, trying to make headway on the current case load. The prospect of failure haunted him. Created extra stress he just didn't need. Stress, demonstrably, sent him straight to the bottle.

"Come on," she coaxed. "It'll be more fun that staying here being pedantic about Love at First Bite. Which you already know off by heart."

He smiled at that. His eyes searched her face, then focussed over her shoulder at Alex. "How much choice do I have?"

"None," said Alex promptly.

"That much?" He reached for the empty bottle on the floor beside him and stood. A whole bottle. She tried to keep the disappointment from her face and failed. He raised his eyebrows at her, apology lurking in his eyes. His thigh brushed her shoulder as he crossed to the kitchen, to put the bottle in the garbage and rinse out the glass. Then he looked at them. "I won't be long."

They waited. Nick came downstairs again, pristine white shirt buttoned to the throat, blue silk jacket unbuttoned, black silk trousers immaculately creased, boot heels tapping on the stairs. Not for the first time she imagined him in the fashion of another era. Elizabethan, say. Hose and slashed velvet and jewels. Did he miss the opulence of those days? Men's fashions now were so drab, by comparison. She must remember to ask him, some day. Question number four thousand and sixty two, awaiting the appropriate moment.

"Let's hit the road, folks," said Alex.

"We'll take the Caddy," said Nick.

"Sure," said Alex.

She sat between them in the front seat, feeling a lot like a kid out with her two big brothers. Except that she felt far from sisterly towards them both, and had no idea how she was going to resolve the dilemma. Had deliberately not thought about it. Shoved it in the too hard basket and pretended that the decision looming in her future was nothing but a figment of her imagination.

It was how, back in med school, she'd dealt with the prospect of anatomy exams.

It hadn't worked then. It wasn't working now.

Come *on,* Natalie. Tonight is for fun. She reached out, switched on the radio, and sang pop songs with Alex all the way to the Nook.

The club was jammed. Clutching the ticket she'd been given at the door -- why, she had no idea -- Natalie stared helplessly at the crush of laughing, drinking, eating bodies. Nick's hand rested high on her shoulder, one cool finger brushing the nape of her neck. She shivered.

"There's Grace," he said, lips against her ear.

"Where?"

His other hand pointed. "There."

Yes, there was Grace. With her partner, Elliot. And Kathy, and Claire, and Benny, and three of the guys from the 105th with their girlfriends, and her fellow ME Andrew and his boyfriend Greg, and what looked like half the day shift from Alex and Nick's place and --

"Look!" she squeaked. "Stonetree's here!"

"You're kidding," said Nick.

No, there he was. He saw them, saw Nick and, pointing, mimed cardiac arrest. Grace saw them too, and waved both bangled arms in the air. She'd saved them three seats.

"Do I smell a conspiracy?" asked Nick.

"I think I'll take the fifth on that."

"This isn't America."

"I'll take it anyway."

She felt his lips brush her hair. "Come on. We're holding up the proceedings," he said, and the three of them squeezed around the closely packed tables and the hilarious patrons to where their friends waited on the other side of the room.

Somehow -- she decided not to enquire too closely -- they'd managed tables right next to the stage.

"You got here!" Grace gasped. "So, who doesn't know who?"

After general introductions, Grace turned to Alex and hit him. "Alex, I could kill you!"

"That's a foolish thing to say in the present company," said Alex, rubbing his arm. "What have I done?"

"Do you know what they're saying tonight *is*?"

"Yeah."

"What?" said Natalie.

Grace flapped her hands. "It's a *karaoke* night. They're going to pull the other half of our tickets out of a hat and we have to get up on the stage in front of everybody and sing or play an instrument."

Natalie stared at Grace, then at Alex. "Is that true?"

He grinned. "What? Didn't I mention that part?"

She dug him in the side with her elbow, then leaned across him to say to Grace, "I'm killing him as soon as you've done. Bags I force feed him marshmallows till he bursts."

"It's a deal," said Grace.

Stonetree said, "Glad you guys finally made it. Especially you, Knight."

"I'm surprised to see you here, Captain," said Nick.

"The feeling is mutual. It's just a shame Schanke couldn't be here, too."

"Yeah. He'd get a real kick out of this. You should hear him leaving his heart in San Francisco."

Alex said to Nick and Natalie, "Can I get either of you a drink?"

"Not for me," said Nick.

"A bucketful of white wine, please," said Natalie. "I need all the Dutch courage I can get."

Alex laughed. "I'll see what I can do."

As he made slow progress towards the bar, the lights dimmed and spotlights drilled the stage. The curtains parted and Freddie, in his inevitable cravat, came out.

"Welcome, one and all, to The Nook!"

Much cheering and applause. Natalie stamped her feet on the floor with the rest of the audience and laughed.

"Tonight's our annual fund raising karaoke night, in case you didn't know, and were wondering what the tickets were for," said Freddie. "All proceeds go to the Children's Hospital, so we'll be suffering in a good cause." More laughter. "Just about anything goes. We've got prizes for the best and the worst performances of the evening, so decide now which you'd rather aim for. Larry will be on stand by to play accompanist for anyone who needs him. I shall be pulling each victim's number from our hat. The bar will remain open. Enjoy!"

The audience applauded some more. Freddie took his place off stage, and Alex returned with two glasses of wine. He handed one to Natalie, sat down and said, "Having fun?"

"The fun won't start till I've bought the marshmallows," Natalie retorted.

He grinned, and sipped his wine.

The first number was called out, and a tall, thin man took the stage. Pulling a harmonica from his pocket, he proceeded to play a rollicking sea shanty. The next performer sang 'Trailer for Sale or Rent', very badly, and the next attempted 'The Music of the Night', forgot the words half way through and retired in confusion.

Natalie soon found herself unstrung with laughter. Grace's number was called early in the piece: she sang 'Big Spender', strutting all over the stage like she owned it. The audience went apoplectic, and yelled for an encore, so she obliged with "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot'. They all sang the choruses.

"Grace, you never said you could sing like that!" Natalie scolded.

Mopping her face with a handkerchief, Grace giggled. "Hey, girl, I grew up on gospel. Wow, that was fun."

"Does that mean I get a reprieve?" said Alex.

"Not on your life, boy," said Grace. "It's the principle of the thing, you understand?"

For Natalie, the best thing about the evening was watching Nick slowly lower his guard, song by song, instrumental by instrumental, until all his defences lay abandoned about him, and he let himself become a part of the hilarity surrounding them. He laughed, he clapped, he even stamped his feet.

In a lull between acts she leaned close to him and said, "Why did you agree to come?"

He smiled at her. "Because it was important to you."

"I'm glad."

"Hey, Natalie!" Kathy reached forward. "What's your number?"

"What?" said Natalie. "Oh!" She dug the crumpled ticket out of her pocket. "Forty seven. Why?"

"You're next, you dummy! They're calling your number!"

"Oh, God," said Natalie, and stood up. The whole table cheered and whistled.

"Go get 'em, tiger," said Alex.

She grinned at him. Looked at Nick. He smiled back. She took a deep breath, and climbed onto the stage. Said to Larry, "Do you know the music for Oliver?"

"It's here somewhere," said Larry, and dug into the huge, haphazard pile of scores on the floor. "Yeah. Here we go."

She'd played Nancy while in medical school. Glancing at Nick, who waggled his eyebrows at her, she toyed briefly with the idea of singing 'As long as he needs me'. But tonight was for fun, so she chose something else.

'Consider Yourself'" she said to Larry.

"Fine. Whenever you're ready."

She hadn't sung in public for years. Had forgotten how it felt, to face all those eyes. Doubtless Nick could hear her stampeding heart from where he sat, more relaxed than she'd seen in months, eyes warm with affection.

She made her fingers relax around the cordless microphone and took a deep breath. Heard the pitch of the first note in her head, and nodded to Larry. He played the introduction. She said a quick prayer.

"Consider yerself at 'ome, consider yerself one of the family, we've taken to you so strong, it's clear -- we're -- going to get along!"

Alex was laughing. Nick was smiling. God, this was great! She'd forgotten how much she loved performing. Her only audience these days was the long suffering Sidney.

The applause was better than Moet et Chandon.

Alex kissed her. On the lips, this time. She kissed him back.

"Thank you," he said.

"Any time," she replied, and looked at Nick. Hoping he'd understood that the song was as much for him as Alex.

"You should get back into singing," he said. "Swap some night shifts. Join a musical society. You love it too much to just let it die."

"I might."

He smiled, but his eyes were serious. "You should."

When at last his number was called, he groaned and tried to leave. Alex grabbed his forearm.

"No way, Jose. We're all in this together."

"But I don't want be in this," said Nick.

"Think of it as a character building experience."

"My character is already built," said Nick.

"So try a little renovation," said Alex.

Nick looked at him. "You're going to pay for this."

"Whatever the price, it'll be worth it," Alex said cheerfully. "Even if it's marshmallows. I'll tell you what. We'll make it a double act."

"What?"

"Trust me," said Alex. "My friend here is a doctor." And dragged Nick up on the stage. The regulars recognised him, and burst into applause. "Two for the price of one," Alex announced, and nodded at Larry, who got up from the piano he'd been using.

"What am I doing?" said Nick.

"Getting on the other piano," said Alex.

Natalie had to laugh at the expression on Nick's face as he sat at the second piano. He looked like he was facing a firing squad instead of Alex. Stonetree, who earlier had reduced his subordinates to hysterics with his rendition of 'Poor Jud is Dead', tapped her on the shoulder. She leaned back to hear him.

"I knew I was doing the right thing, teaming him up with Haid," he said complacently. "Look at him. He's having the time of his life."

"He's certainly having something," Natalie agreed. A nervous breakdown, for starters.

Alex said something, and Nick goggled at him. Alex nodded vigorously. Nick shook his head, lifted two fingers, and started to play Chopsticks. He played it all the way through once, by himself, and if a vampire could be said to blush, then he was blushing.

This time she heard what Alex said. "Again." As Nick, mutiny clear as a flag on his face, started to play it again, Alex commenced counterpoint. Darted in and out of the childish melody. Improvised theatrically, with much hand waving and head tossing. Nick stared. Natalie held her breath. It could go either way ... and she bit her lip as she silently urged *do it do it do it.*

He did it. Grinned wickedly. Abandoned his reserve. Surrendered to impulse, to humanity, to the moment. Became once more the Nicholas who had trod the boards in Erica's eighteenth century melodramas. She felt the tears rise, and blinked them back.

Clearly, Alex was surprised by what he'd let loose. But only for a moment. Then it was on for young and old. Musical slapstick, physical comedy. Chopsticks a la Victor Borge. She had no idea of the composers they were lampooning. Thought she recognised Mozart. Beethoven. Maybe Wagner.

Nick was doing a Liberace. Grace was sobbing with laughter beside her. Stonetree was practically on the floor. Poor Schanke. He was going to spit, missing this.

Nick was on his feet now, and Alex had his back to the keyboard, playing blind. They swapped sides. Swapped back again. Played the same piano.

Natalie laughed so hard she got the hiccups. She cried and hoped no-one noticed. In her wildest dreams, she'd never imagined seeing Nick have fun. Never imagined seeing him so frivolous. So human.

Breathless with their own laughter, Alex and Nick resumed their respective stools. Returned to the basic theme. Pianissimo. The audience hushed. Half a beat then again, this time fortissimo, with chords majestic. Chopsticks thundered to its triumphant conclusion.

They received a standing ovation. On her feet, Natalie watched Nick and Alex take their bows. Alex was tousled, sweating. Thank God Nick wasn't. Alex turned to him and held out his hand. Nick shook it, comically formal.

Then Alex pulled him into a hug. Nick's face went blank. *Come on, Nick* Natalie pleaded, hands fisted. Tentatively Nick's arms lifted. Returned the embrace. And the blankness fragmented: into shock, into hope and the faint echo of memory.

"And that's something I thought I'd never see," a voice said quietly in her ear. Startled, she turned. Stonetree was smiling, just faintly. "Nick acting like a regular member of the human race. Nice to see him come down from his ivory tower. He gets too carried away with the loner image. I had the feeling Haid would bring him out of himself."

"Yes," said Natalie.

Then Alex and Nick rejoined them. "That was fun," said Alex.

"I want you for the Christmas benefit at the Retirement Home," said Grace. "Both of you."

"Sure," said Alex. "It's a date. Isn't it, Nick?"

"If you say so," said Nick.

Natalie reached over and squeezed his hand. "I'm really proud of you," she said, so that only he could hear her.

He carried her hand to his lips. It could only be her imagination, that they felt warm against her skin.

The night played itself out. In the end, Trailer for Sale or Rent won the prize for the worst performance. Nick and Alex were voted the best.

"And I hope," said Freddie, bestowing a statuette of a crotchet upon each, "that you'll be back next year to defend your title."

Then it was time to go home. They drove back to the warehouse in silence.

"We won't come up," said Natalie. "I have got to get some sleep before work tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow," said Alex.

Nick watched them drive away together, then put his car in the garage. The loft's silence embraced him. Placing the statuette on the coffee table he sat on his sofa, elbow propped on the back, head resting against his hand.

Only when the sun came up, forcing him to lower the screens, did he move. And then he went to bed. And for once, did not dream.

CHAPTER SIX

Alex was already at his desk, frowning over paperwork, when Nick arrived at the station house the following night.

"Feeling gungho, are we?" he said, dropping his jacket over the back of his chair.

"Hi," said Alex absently. He flipped back a couple of pages, frowning.

Nick sat down. "What's that?"

"All of the statements from Zabriskie's associates. Such charming group. Cutthroats Incorporated. I keep thinking, if only I read these one more time the answer will leap off the page and give me a black eye."

Nick pulled a face. "Hope springs eternal."

Alex nodded. "And optimism is my middle name." He glanced up. "That was fun last night. I'm glad you came."

"So am I," said Nick. "Thanks. For twisting my arm."

"Any time." His expression changed. "Hello. Here's trouble."

Nick looked around. Duty Officer Penny Rankin approached, her thin, sallow face tight with distress. "Captain!" she called.

Stonetree, wandering out of his office to get a refill from the coffee pot, said, "What is it?"

"55 Tango just called in a body, sir. A little girl. Some wino scrounging for food in the Hartigan Mall found her in a dumpster. The Crime Scene team is en route now from the burglary on Rourke. Sir, the description matches Tina Wallis."

Stonetree sighed and hung his head.

Tina Wallis. Eight years old. Abducted from her front yard nine days ago. No witnesses. Mr and Mrs Wallis, good people, frantic, desperate. Now she wasn't missing persons. Now she was homicide. A kiddie killing. Cops hated kiddie killings. So did the public. The Mayor was going to be on him like a rash over this one.

"All right, you two," he said to Nick and Alex. "It's yours. Don't screw it up." He heaved another sigh. "I'm gonna call the Mayor. I'll see you down there."

Murder scenes, as a rule, abound with gallows humour. The grislier the crime, the more ghoulish the jokes. They never talk about it, but the cops know why. Self defence isn't always a matter of karate and a Colt .45.

This crime scene was silent, except for the popping of camera flashes and the terse, necessary comments of the Crime Scene officers as they recorded and analysed their findings. Even the inevitable media hung back, subdued. One anchorwoman saw Nick and said, "Detective! Where's Captain Stonetree?"

"He's on his way," said Nick, not breaking stride. Then he hesitated and turned back. Looked at all of them, with their expensive equipment and their expensive faces and added, "I know you've got jobs to do, but this looks like being very nasty. Do everyone, especially yourselves, a favour, and keep the scare mongering to a minimum. Nobody hates this kind of thing more than we do, and you'd better believe we'll be working over time to catch whoever did this. Okay?"

Casey Neale, a recent addition to the Channel 4 news team and as placid as a great white pointer, thrust a microphone into his face.

"Do you have any comment on the fact that in the past month five kids, male and female, all between the ages of seven and ten, have gone missing across Toronto?"

"No comment," Nick said automatically. "Now if you'll excuse me, I've got a job to do."

"Yeah, well just make sure you let us do ours," Casey retorted. Her blonde hair gleamed in the bright, artificial light.

"You'll be told everything you need to know," Nick said firmly. Turned his back on them, and looked for Alex.

He had avoided the media pack and was standing under a light pole, interviewing a witness. Skirting an abandoned shopping trolley, Nick moved to join him. *Five* missing kids? Did Stonetree

know? He couldn't, or he would have said something. Five missing kids. Coincidence? If not, if they all turned up like Tina Wallis ... if this was Tina Wallis ...

The witness was a filth ingrained, fume ridden wino. As Nick approached, Alex held up a hand to halt the stuttering flow of words, and looked at his partner.

"This is Jerry, who found the body. He was looking for scraps, lifted the lid of the dumpster and - - "

"And there she was," said Jerry. His watch cap was full of holes, so that sparse tufts of faded red hair poked into the night air. His blue eyes were blood shot, the lashes crusted with yellow muck. Filthy fingers and quick-bitten fingernails curved from the unravelled ends of his gloves.

"You didn't touch her, move her?" said Nick.

Jerry shook his head from side to side. "No, sir. Dunno what y'could git, touchin' a dead body. All kindsa germs and d'seases 'n things on a dead body. Even a little one."

Alex said, "Do you hang around here a lot?"

"Mall's part of me beat," said Jerry. "Good pickin's in malls."

"And you didn't see anyone else hanging around, near the dumpster?"

Jerry dragged his stain sleeve under his nose. "Sure. Seen Amos, 'n Billy, 'n Fran. Seen Davie, too, but he 'n I don' talk no more on account of he stole my box. Best box I ever had, I could even stretch m'legs out a bit, an' he took it." Resentment drew Jerry's bony shoulders level with his ears. His scabby bottom lip trembled.

Nick and Alex exchanged a look. "I'll leave you to it," said Nick. "Good luck."

"Gee, thanks," said Alex.

Nick ducked under the yellow and black police tape and approached the dumpster, hands safely in his pockets. The crime scene officers had finished photographing, and were now busy sketching the immediate area. Nick nodded to them.

"You finished around the dumpster, Al?"

Al Honeysett nodded. "Yeah. Maybe whoever dumped her left their prints, but the odds of sorting 'em out from the thirty-forty other sets we found are about as good as Trinidad and Tobago's chances of winning the World Series."

"Terrific," said Nick.

The dumpster lid was open. Its rusted, flaked paint surface was dusty with powder, patterned with fingerprints like a piece of modern art.

The little girl inside was naked. The skin of her head and neck had turned greenish red, and the discolouration was beginning to spread towards her chest. There were rope marks around her throat, her wrists, her ankles. Her inner thighs were copiously smeared with dried blood. Bruises mottled her arms and stomach. She lay on her back, legs sprawled apart, palms and eyes open to the sky. Her body was perfumed with the scents of rotting vegetables, mouldy fruit and rancid fat. She did not look as though she were sleeping.

Nick turned away. Examined the surrounding area with enhanced vision, and saw nothing. A familiar engine note caught his attention. Natalie. She got out of her car, nodded at him, and walked across to the dumpster with Alex, who had finished with Jerry.

"Hi," she said.

"It's a bad one, Nat," he said.

"The ones with kids always are," she agreed.

"No. This is different. This is ... bad."

Her expression was quizzical, apprehensive. "Then I'd better get it over with, hadn't I?" Chin elevated, shoulders resolute, she approached the dumpster, fingers tight on the handle of her instrument bag. Alex made to follow her. Nick caught his arm.

"Alex --"

"I heard you, Nick. Look, I've been a cop five years now. I've seen my share of bodies."

Nick let him go.

Natalie's intake of breath was audible ten feet away. She jerked as though someone had punched her. Alex's reaction was silent. His entire body shuddered. Standing still, he staggered. One hand went out to steady himself against the dumpster, and was pulled back at the last minute.

Nick watched as Natalie armoured herself against human feeling, human compassion. This was not somebody's child, somebody's love and hope and pride and joy. This was a job.

She was too short to examine the body properly. Alex fetched her a crate from well beyond the crime scene. She stood on it, her face masked against the wall of odour rising from the refuse in the dumpster, and began her examination.

A sudden clamour from the media's ranks behind him turned his head. Stonetree. Nick waited for him to make the standard response, then joined him.

"Is it Tina Wallis?" Stonetree asked.

"She's naked, and she's been deade a while but -- yeah. She matches the photo." The photo supplied by her distraught parents. A serious, gap toothed sprite in a bathing costume, arms full of wet puppy. "More or less."

Stonetree sighed. "I've already spoken to the Wallises. They'll meet us at the morgue, for the formal identification. Patrol car's gone to pick them up."

Nick nodded. Said without thinking, "I'm glad Schanke's out of this."

"Yeah. Too bad all the other cops with kids aren't lying gut shot in the hospital."

Nick bit back a retort, half turned away. Stonetree's hand on his arm turned him back.

"Sorry. But this is a bad one, Nick. I can feel it in my bones, like an ague coming."

"Me too," said Nick. "Captain, do you know anything about other missing kids? Another four of them, all resident in Toronto or its surrounds. All snatched in the last four weeks?"

"Kids go missing all the time. They don't have to have been snatched. Where'd you hear that?"

Nick jerked his head towards the hovering media crews. "If it's true ..."

"I don't want to think about if it's true," Stonetree said. "I also don't want to think about if we've screwed up. There's supposed to a crime monitoring procedure to pick up on stuff like that. How come the media always know more than we do? It turns us into a joke." Hands on hips, he stared at the gritty asphalt and shook his head. "I'll make some calls when we get back to the precinct. We may need a city wide task force on this. The Mayor'll be--" He stopped. Natalie was walking towards them, Alex beside her. Not touching her, but close. Her face was leached of colour.

"Captain," she said, quiet, contained.

"Dr Lambert."

"I've done everything I can here. Rigor's passed off. She's been dead maybe twenty four, thirty six hours. Lividity suggests she died in pretty much the same position as she was found. But it's highly improbable that she died in the dumpster. She was sexually assaulted, beaten, and strangled. For starters. I'll know more after the autopsy."

"Tonight," said Stonetree. "And the typed report on my desk first thing in the morning. Start work as soon as the parents have formally IDed the body. I'm going back to the precinct. Keep me apprised."

The coroner's office orderlies were hovering near by, gurney and body bag at the ready. Natalie nodded to them. As they crossed to the dumpster she said, "You know who she is?"

"Maybe," said Nick.

They watched in silence as the orderlies hefted the small body out of the dumpster and zipped it inside the black bag. As they wheeled it past, Natalie said, "Viewing room first. I'll follow you down."

"Sure, doc," said one orderly.

"See you later," Natalie said to Nick and Alex.

"Yeah," said Nick.

The media crews had crowded forward to get a graphic shot of the small shrouded shape on the gurney as it was lifted into the coroner's wagon. They bombarded Natalie with questions which she refused to answer, and filmed both her and the wagon as they left the scene.

"Come on," said Nick. "We have to meet the parents."

"How could they do it, Nick?" said Alex. Professional detachment had succumbed: his face and voice were desolate. "How could they do that to a child? How could anyone kill --"

She was small, and thin, and doubtless her blood would taste of rotting turnips and maggot ridden offal, but she was food ... and LaCroix was coming. If he were to escape this time, if he were to slip the shackles and be free, he must appease the yammering beast. The choice was simple: a half-starved peasant brat, bones near to breaking through the meagre flesh, pustilent sores disfiguring her face, or himself.

"Who knows?" said Nick. "Let's go."

"No," said Alison Wallis. "I want to see her, properly. I want to kiss her goodbye. If it is her. I don't want to see my baby on some television screen. Take me to her. Now."

"Honey --" said Bob Wallis.

"No, Bob."

"If you'd come with us, then," said Nick.

The viewing room was pristine. White tiles and stainless steel, everything clean and hygienic. The attendant wore a white coat and a neutral expression, eyes tactfully averted.

Nick looked at the Wallises. "We think she's been dead a day, day and a half. There's no disfiguration, but there is some discolouration of the skin."

"Uh huh," said Bob Wallis. He was in his early forties, a greying, ageing man with badly cut hair and a plaid flannelette shirt that refused to tuck in properly at the back.

"Are you ready?"

"Yeah. I guess," said Wallis. He reached for his wife, but her arms were tucked tightly across her narrow chest. His hand dropped back to his side, and he nodded slowly. "Yeah. We're ready."

Nick nodded to the attendant, who opened one of the shiny stainless steel doors set into the wall before them. Cold air seeped into the room. The attendant grasped the shiny stainless steel handle on the front of the shelf, and slid it out of the refrigerator. When Nick nodded again, he drew back the white sheet that covered the small, still figure on the shelf, and bared the small face for inspection.

"Mr Wallis, Mrs Wallis, is this your daughter, Tina Louise Wallis?" Nick asked.

"Yes, it is my daughter," Alison Wallis said steadily.

"Oh God, oh God," Bob Wallis said, and sobbed once. "Oh Tina, oh my kiddo."

Alison Wallis did not kiss her child goodbye. Did not touch her at all. She reached out a hand and straightened the sheet which covered her, because it had slipped slightly to one side. She said, "I asked you to watch her. For five minutes, just watch her, while I checked on the brownies. But you couldn't drag your eyes away from the game. Not even for five minutes. My mother always said you weren't to be trusted."

Bob Wallis was crying openly, tears splashing from his chin, from his softened jawline, soaking into the plaid shirt. He made no attempt to stop his wife as she stalked from the viewing room. Did not seem to have heard her at all.

He reached beneath the sheet for the small, cold hand with its bracelet of abrasions about the wrist, and folded it into his own. "Oh, baby, oh baby," he crooned, the words catching in his throat. "Daddy loves you, Tina, daddy loves you. You know that, don't you?"

"Mr Wallis ..." Nick began.

"I know, I know," Bob Wallis said. "Just give me a minute, Goddammit." On a deep, shuddering breath, he replaced his daughter's hand beneath the sheet. The attendant covered her face again, and slid the shelf back into the refrigerator.

"We're very sorry, Mr Wallis," Nick said. "We'll do everything we can to find who did this."

"Do you know ... how ... she --"

Before Nick could speak, Alex said, "Nothing's conclusive yet, Mr Wallis. You do understand, don't you, that there will have to be an autopsy?"

"Yeah. I understand."

"We'll let you know, as soon as all our examinations are complete."

"When can we have her back? For the funeral."

Alex said, "As soon as possible, Mr Wallis."

"Okay. Okay." Bob Wallis looked at Alex, then at Nick. "Why Tina? Who could hurt my little girl? She was just a little girl." He was crying again, his whole fleshy frame shaking with grief. One hand rose

to cover his face, the fingers splayed. The other, fisted tight, struck repeatedly at his thigh. His shoulders bowed slowly until he was hunched over like a man with the gripe.

Nick looked away. Alex moved towards Bob Wallis. Put his arms around the defeated shoulders and pulled him into a tight embrace. Held him fiercely, and said, "I swear to you, Bob, we'll get this bastard. We'll make him pay."

"You promise?" sobbed Bob Wallis.

Alex's face was stark. "As God is my witness, Bob. We'll do whatever it takes to get him." His eyes met Nick's over the stricken father's shoulder. "Whatever it takes."

Natalie snapped on a fresh pair of latex gloves, and tied a new mask around her neck. All her instruments were laid out and ready. She was wearing clean greens. Her unruly hair was contained in a cap.

"You okay?" asked a concerned voice behind her. Grace.

"Sure," said Natalie, without turning round.

"I didn't think so," said Grace.

Natalie leaned her hands on the dissection table. "There are times when I hate this job, Grace."

"I hear you, sister."

She turned then, and met Grace's overwhelmingly compassionate gaze. "What kind of a world do we live in, anyway?"

"An imperfect one."

"Oh, I think that's an understatement."

"Dr Lambert?"

It was Jeff. "Is that the little girl from the dumpster?"

The orderly shrugged as he wheeled in the burdened trolley, his face grim. Haunted. "Dunno, doc. It's another kid, is all I know."

"Okay. Thanks, Jeff."

Together they lifted the lightly laden body bag onto the examination table. Jeff departed. Grace patted her on the shoulder and said, "I'll be out in the office if you need me."

"Thanks, Grace," said Natalie. She stared at the zippered bag. Might as well get on with it. The sooner she began, the sooner it would be over and she could start putting this one behind her.

She heard Grace say, "Good evening, detectives. Dr Lambert's in."

She looked up. Nick and Alex came into the lab, faces tight and self contained. God, poor Alex. This had to be tearing him apart.

"What are you two doing here?" she asked.

Nick said, "Stonetree wants us on this every step of the way. He's got the Mayor breathing down his neck for all information as it comes to hand."

"Well gee, maybe we can invite the Mayor down to watch the autopsy," Natalie said brightly. "I can put up a 'full house' sign on the door and send out for popcorn."

"Nat..."

Alex said, "Anything you turn up, Stonetree wants to know about immediately. This is shaping up to be a regular media circus. We have to stay."

"Your choice," Natalie said. "Did you get a positive ID on the body?"

"Yeah," said Nick. "Name's Tina Wallis."

"That's good," said Natalie. "Makes a change from Jane Doe no. 456. If you're staying, keep out of my way and don't talk." She unzipped the body bag and slid it out from beneath the cadaver. Switched on the microphone. "Case file no. 34/78/b. Autopsy performed on the body of Tina Wallis by Medical Examiner Natalie Lambert. June 27th —" She glanced at her watch. "2.55 am. A preliminary external examination shows no sign of broken bones. There is bruising to the throat, the —"

As she catalogued the obvious signs of trauma, she was aware of Nick and Alex settling down in chairs on the other side of the lab. She knew why they were waiting. Immediacy of evidence was part of the reason, but not all of it. They didn't want her to go through this alone. Nick's concern she understood, welcomed. But Alex? It presumed a depth of feeling that she wasn't sure she wanted.

No. That was a lie. Time to face facts. She wanted it, all right. Alex was fun. He told her stories that made her laugh. He was intelligent and compassionate and interested in life. He was spontaneous and outrageous and he had no secrets.

He wasn't afraid of showing his feelings. He made her feel more feminine, more attractive, than she had in a very long time. And he was, put at its simplest, a good man. A man of principle, and honour and cherished convictions.

But to admit Alex was to deny Nick, and acknowledge a truth she half feared he had already embraced.

She was nearly thirty one, and she was not immortal. Nick could afford to wait, to flirt with the idea of mortal love then dance away, to return in half a century or so.

By which time she might well be dead and gone, with nothing to show for those fifty years but an empty broken heart and a life wasted in waiting for a man who, ultimately, did not really want to change. Who loved her, but as a friend, and nothing more than that.

As her hands automatically went about their business she glanced up. Alex smiled at her again, a supportive, encouraging smile. She smiled back, quickly.

Oh, yes. She could love love him. Could walk with him in sunlight, and lie with him in safety.

The question was: how much did she want to?

An hour and a half later the autopsy was finished. The samples and fluids and scrapings labelled and lined up ready for testing. The memory imprinted with extrapolated imagery that an ocean of alcohol might blur, but never erase.

Without looking up she said, "Tell Stonetree the report will be on his desk by nine a.m."

Nick said, "All right."

Alex said, "We'll see you."

Then they left, without saying anything else, without trying to touch her, thank God, because if they had tried to touch her she would have screamed or struck them or vomited because they were *men,* and she *hated* men with their brutality and their violence and oh God, oh God, rape and sodomy and bruising inside the throat and semen and oh, sweet Jesus, she is a child: how can this be?

She stumbled out from behind the table, bruising her thigh on the corner of the bench. Fetched up against the cool, tiled wall and stood there, face pressed to the hard, impersonal surface, and cried.

On the way back to the precinct house, Alex suddenly said, "Pull over."

"What?"

"Just pull over, would you? Now?"

Nick pulled into the kerb. "What's wrong?"

"I won't be long," said Alex. "I just have to ... I won't be long."

They were opposite a church. St Peter's. There was a light shining through the windows, another glowed above the entry way. Alex walked up the gravel path, head down, hands shoved deep into his jacket pockets. Nick watched him go inside, then turned off the engine and slumped against the door.

If only Natalie hadn't been on duty tonight. If only he hadn't. If only Bob Wallis had forgotten his precious game for five minutes. If only some appetites were not so monstrous.

Time passed. Nick glanced back at the church, but there was no sign of Alex. He checked his watch. Ten to six. Looked out of the window. The sun was coming. He went to fetch Alex.

The church loomed over him. Nick closed his eyes. He could go inside. Had spent nearly a whole day in a church, not so long ago. It hadn't killed him. He had survived the statues and the crosses and the incense and the palpable aura of sanctity, acid on his soul ...

He could open the door a fraction and call Alex's name through the crack until Alex came out.

Alex didn't answer him. The sky was lightening perceptibly. He had to get home. He pushed the door wide and went in.

The stench of holy water. The crucified Christ, stretched wide on his self-inflicted rack, face serene. The crosses. Nick clutched blindly at the door jamb, head spinning, eight centuries of darkness cringing before the light.

He was hungry. He had no reserves of strength, after this terrible night, to fight the pain of this place. He saw the altar, the candles, the statues, his partner, through a red tinged golden haze.

The church was empty. Alex was praying. Had fallen to his knees before the altar, laid his hands on the altar rail and rested his forehead on his knuckles.

"Alex!" Nick called. Put out a hand to clutch the corner of a pew and forced himself to move down the aisle, closer to the altar, and the effigy of the one he had loved, and betrayed, and could not face. "Alex!" To his own ears he sounded desperate, despairing, as he lurched from side to side and the echoes of a thousand whispered prayers thundered through the empty places within him.

He could hardly see at all, now, was making his way by touch alone. Someone was calling his name, but he could not answer. His hand, reaching for something to hold onto, touched the smooth, cool surface of a crucifix. He cried aloud at the pain and fell to his knees. He had to get out, he had to get away, but he didn't know where he was or who he was or why the very air against his skin seared him like flame.

A voice he thought he should know bellowed in his ear. "*Nick* !" He opened his eyes. Alex. "Nick, for God's sake what's wrong? Are you sick?"

"Alex," he whispered.

Alex's arm was supporting him. "I'm getting you to a doctor."

"No! No, I'm not sick."

"Like hell you're not," said Alex, grimly.

"No doctor," Nick gasped. "The light, Alex. The light. I have to get home."

Alex swore. "It's nearly morning. I'm sorry, Nick, I forgot."

They ran from the church, Alex half supporting him, and raced the rising sun back to the warehouse.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Alex pulled aside the door to the loft. Nick stumbled through it, snatched the remote from the table and barricaded himself behind cold steel. When the last of the shutters rolled down he threw the remote away and stood in the middle of the room, shaking.

He heard Alex say, "Nick, are you sure you don't need a doctor? Should I call someone? Natalie?"

His sight was clearing. He said, "No. I told you. I'm fine."

"You don't look fine. You look like you could use a drink, at least. Have you got anything, whiskey, or brandy --"

"*I said I'm fine .*"

Silence. An aeroplane droned overhead. Nick glanced at Alex. The other man's expression was shocked.

"I'm sorry," Nick said in a normal, human voice. "I know you're only trying to help, but there's nothing wrong with me. I was just afraid of getting caught in the sun. My allergy is ... severe."

"Yeah. It must be," said Alex. "Well, if you're sure you're all right ..."

"I'm fine. Go home. Get some sleep."

Alex laughed. "One problem. I just realised. My car's back at the station."

"Take the Caddy. Leave it there. I'll make my own way in tonight."

"I'll pick you up."

He could feel the weight of Alex's gaze between his shoulder blades. "Sure. Fine. Thanks." I don't care. Just get out.

"Right. I'll go, then."

Alex collected the keys from the kitchen bench where he'd put them, and headed for the door. Nick counted the seconds before he would be alone. Before he could drown the terror in cool, thick blood.

The footsteps stopped. Alex said, "Nick. Look. This is probably none of my business but ... are you sure it was only the sun that upset you? I mean -- in the church, it looked like --"

"It was the sun, Alex."

"Because you said, once, that you were lapsed. I guess I was wondering if that had anything to do with it. With how upset you got in the church, I mean. Because Nick, you were really upset."

Nick continued to stare at the shutters. "Go home, Alex."

Alex said, "If you want to talk about it, I'll listen. What ever else Brother Andrew used to say about me, he did admit I was a good listener." He tried to laugh. "And you know what they say about confession being good for the soul."

"You renounced your right to hear confessions."

A moment's silence. "Yes. That's true. I guess I don't mean confessions as in your sins, I mean -- "

"Good," said Nick. "I don't think you'd want to hear them."

There was exasperation in Alex's voice this time. "Look. All I'm saying is that if you'd like a friendly ear, you've got one. If you'd like a friend, you've got one. Okay? That's all I'm saying."

Nick said, "I know what you're saying, Alex."

There was no future in friendship with a mortal. That had been LaCroix's first, last, and best lesson. The one he most delighted in teaching. The one Nick had least wanted to learn.

So despite LaCroix, and the truth he'd never wanted to admit, he *had* made friends. Henri. Matthew. Katherine and Gordon. The Tofflers. All gone now, dead or left behind. And after Chicago, the trial, he'd decided it was too hard. Told himself that it didn't matter. That he didn't need friends. He was used to being alone.

Then came Natalie. And Schanke.

Now there was Alex.

Alex, who could easily become the mortal friend he'd been denied since his willing, ignorant surrender to LaCroix.

Since Justin LeGros, who had gone to his medieval grave never knowing the fate of his brother in arms, his boon companion, his ever cher Nicholas. Had gone to his grave a coarse faced, cross grained old

man, fond of wine and women and stories of war, with the unhealed wound of a friend's desertion buried beneath layers of excess.

Who did not know -- or did he, now? -- that his passing was mourned in darkness and with bloodied tears by a man who was no longer a man, and who had loved him like the brother he should have had. Would have had, if things had been different.

The clack of keys on formica. A quick, sharp exhalation of air. "Never mind about the Caddy. I'll call a cab."

Nick listened to Alex's footsteps, dull thuds against the wooden floor. Retreating. Withdrawing.

He closed his eyes.

He was tired of being alone.

LaCroix was dead.

I decide.

He turned. "Alex."

Alex stopped. Swung around. His expression was a muddle of resignation and wariness and hope.

He was so tired. The closest seat was the piano stool. He sat down. Stared at his reflection in the glossy black finish. Alex's breathing was loud in the silence. Nick touched Middle C. Spent its thin voice once, and withdrew his hand.

"A long time ago," he said at last, "I gave my soul to God. Then I took it back, and gave it to somebody else. I've never forgiven Him for not trying harder to stop me."

He felt as well as heard Alex's approach. The hand that came to rest on his shoulder was warm. Heavy. The comfort of that simple, human touch closed his throat and his eyes.

Eventually, he said, "Go home, Alex." Not an order, this time. A thank you.

The fingers on his shoulder tightened once, quickly, and were removed. There came the soft scuffing of shoe leather on wood, the quiet click of car keys gathered in the palm of a hand. The mechanical commentary of the elevator, descending.

Nick lowered his head onto his folded arms.

I decide.

He flew to work the following night. Landed safely in an alley, and took the stairs into the station house two at a time.

"Good," said Stonetree. "You and Haid, in my office as soon as he gets here."

Alex came in five minutes later. "You okay?" he asked.

Nick nodded. "Sure. I'm fine. Come on, Stonetree wants to see us."

Another dead child, Marco Castelli, had been found that morning. On a construction site this time. Same M.O. The Mayor had ordered the formation of an official city wide taskforce, to focus on solving the murders of Tina Wallis and Marco Castelli and, presumably, the other three children.

As of this second, Nick and Alex were off all other cases. Someone else would handle them. All their energies, their attention, were to be focussed on solving these murders.

The taskforce was under the control of Captain Dwayne Prescott of the 89th precinct, which was where the Task force HQ was based. Prescott had headed the Davison serial killer investigation back in '82. The Chan kidnapping case in '90. He had an established media profile. For the duration of the investigation, he was God.

Nick and Alex would split their time between the 89th and the 27th, since Tina Wallis had been found on their turf. Tina Wallis was their case in particular. They'd co-ordinate the investigation into her death. But there'd be twice daily taskforce briefings at the 89th for the day and night shifts. A central database. The Mayor expected daily updates. There was a special Mayoral Office media liaison team. No comment to the press to be made by anyone else, on pain of instant dismissal.

Every known or suspected child molester, deviant and released child killer was to be brought in and exhaustively interviewed. Every family member and friend of the murdered or missing children was to be interviewed. Adult friends of the family. School teachers, priests, Cub Scout and Brownie officials, shop keepers and school bus drivers. Every house or apartment within a ten block radius of the child's home and place of disappearance was to be canvassed. Every employee of the Hartigan Mall was to be checked out. Every worker on the construction site. The construction site had been closed down. Plaster

casts were being taken of every single tyre track, so they could be compared with all the vehicles which had authorised access to the site. Casts of every foot print, so they could be compared with the foot prints of all authorised personnel.

In addition, a city wide search was underway for the bodies of the other three children. All building sites, abandoned warehouses, parks, empty lots, shopping malls, were being searched with dogs. Print and television were being asked to show photos of the missing children in every edition, or in every news bulletin. A police telephone hot line, anonymity guaranteed, had been set up for members of the public to call with any information, no matter how trivial.

"The Mayor wants this solved," said Stonetree. "And he wants it solved fast. I know you'll do your best. Have all your outstanding cases and notes to me within the hour, so I can reassign them. That's all."

"Shit," said Alex, slumping into his chair. "Co-ordinating World War Two would have been easier."

Nick started sorting through the case files on his desk. "There's going to be a lot of pressure with this one, Alex. A lot of media attention. One mistake or no mistakes, they'll be dogging us like jackals."

Alex looked at him. "And this is supposed to inpsire me with confidence, yes?"

Nick grinned, briefly. "It's supposed to prepare you for the excitement of being involved in a high profile case."

Stacking his own files Alex said, "Remind me to contain my enthusiasm."

Nick stretched an elastic band around the pile of manila folders. "Looks like The Nook's going to have to manage without you for a while."

"I know," said Alex. "Dammit. Hey. I forgot to tell you. There's a guy wants to meet with me about doing some gigs in his night club."

"Yeah? Who?"

Alex shrugged. "His name's Eddie Cross. I've never heard of him, but he seems to have a lot of contacts. He was at The Nook for the Karaoke night. Mentioned you. Thought your impersonation of Beethoven was very apt."

Nick snorted. "Like he'd know, right?"

"He asked if you'd be interested as well. I told him probably not."

"Good."

"Figured you'd say that." He shrugged. "He and I are getting together for a drink in the next couple of days. If I get time. May be something. May be nothing. I'll wait and see."

He stacked his last notebook on the pile. "I think that's everything."

"Good. Let's go."

But Alex didn't move. Stayed seated at his desk, and rested his forehead in his hands. The light had drained from his face, leaving it older, and tired.

"Alex?"

He looked up. "They're all dead, aren't they? All those kids. All abused. Beaten. Discarded."

Nick hesitated. "We don't know that for sure."

"I'm sure. Two down, three to go. Three more families whose worst nightmares are about to come true. Three more sets of lives, destroyed forever. And somewhere out there, the sick bastard responsible is eating and sleeping and laughing and living his life." He sat back. His face was stark. Grieving. "Even after everything I've seen in this job, I find it hard to comprehend this kind of evil."

"Do you?" said Nick.

Alex picked up his files and notes. "I meant what I said to Bob Wallis, you know. I'll do whatever it takes to catch this animal. Children have to be protected. If we can't do that, our society is doomed. And damned."

Nick nodded. "I know."

They gave Stonetree their case files and notes and took separate cars to the 89th. Two interview rooms had been turned into incident rooms. Prescott had appopriated a third as his office. He was a tall, spare man in his early fifties. Grey hair, crew cut. Hooded eyes. He carried his left shoulder higher than the right, legacy of a bullet wound in an exchange of fire with a bank robber.

"Detective Knight," he said, not offering to shake hands. "I've heard good things about you from Captain Stonetree. And Captain Hill in Vancouver says you've the makings of a fine detective, Haid. This case is one way of getting your feet wet."

"More like going in completely over my head, sir," said Alex.

Prescott didn't smile. "Team briefing in ten minutes. Incident room A. Dismissed."

"Think I should brush up my goose step?" said Alex, as they waited in the incident room.

"I think you should keep your mouth shut and your eyes open," said Nick, with a smile.

After that, there was no time more time for small talk. Not that evening, nor in the days that followed. Two days later, the third body was found. Anita Lewis. Dropped into a storm water drain. Same M.O. Natalie came in to brief them on that one. Since she'd performed the first autopsy, she was performing them all, to maintain consistency of evidence.

She was looking drawn. Alex managed five minutes with her after the briefing.

"You holding up okay?" he asked, his arm going round her shoulders. He felt her weight sag against him for a moment, then she straightened. Took a half step away, so that he had to let go of her.

"Sure." She looked at him keenly. "How about you?"

His shoulders slumped and he shook his head. "Not so good. I thought I'd gotten past Molly's death. But I'm starting to think maybe I never will. Not completely. Maybe there are some wounds time just can't heal."

"Oh, Alex."

He managed a tight smile. "Sorry. Don't mean to rain on your parade."

"You're not," she said. "I'm always ready to listen, if you want to talk."

"Thanks." He touched her arm. "You still okay for dinner tomorrow night?"

"Are you kidding? It's all that's been keeping me going."

She turned her head as Nick approached. He was frowning, but his expression lightened as he saw her.

"Hey, Nat."

"Hey, yourself. Sorry I haven't called you in the last few days."

"Don't apologise," he said with a swift smile. "I haven't been picking up the phone."

"Schanke's perp goes to trial Friday, doesn't he?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I'm down as a possible witness, so if I don't see you before then, I'll see you in court. Gotta run. Happy hunting."

Nick watched her thread her way through the milling station personnel, then looked at Alex. "Got a minute?"

"Sure," said Alex.

"In here," said Nick, and led the way into incident room

"Do you mind?" he asked the uniform who was on one of the computers.

She took one look at his face, said, "Not at all, detective," and escaped.

"What?" said Alex.

Nick shut the door. "I've just gone three rounds with Christine Lopez."

"Who?" said Alex.

"My point exactly. You don't even know whose toes you're stepping on. Chris Lopez and Trish Szabeth have got the Castelli case. They're on the same task force we are. The word is 'colleagues'. If I showed you a mug shot, do you think you'd recognise them?"

"I'm not stepping on anybody's toes," said Alex, folding his arms across his chest.

"No?" said Nick, eyebrows raised. "Then explain this, and I quote. What does my partner think he's doing, re-interviewing their victim's family? Their assigned suspects? What does my partner think he's doing, accessing their case notes and reading them? I asked her to ask my partner these questions. She said Trish already has. She said that since he'd seen fit to ignore Trish's polite request to butt out, would I like to do something about it please? Or she would do something about it."

Alex shoved his hands in his pockets. "Sorry. She should have come to me."

"What difference would it have made?" Nick demanded. "You've already been spoken to once. Once should have been enough. What do you think you're doing?

"My job."

"No. Your job is to investigate everything to do with Tina Wallis. We've still got eight people to interview there. Not to mention ten more known pedophiles to shake up. Maybe fifteen more Mall

employees. We're still trying to find the wino who found her. And you're busy offending Lopez and Szabeth? Give me a break!"

"Sorry," said Alex.

"A genuine penitent if ever I saw one," Nick said. "Alex, just do your job and let everyone else do theirs. Okay? Is that so much to ask?"

"My job is to catch the bastard who's butchering these children," said Alex tightly. "I refuse to recognise artificial boundaries as to what I can and can't do. You can't honestly say you're surprised? I told you --"

"And I'm telling you," said Nick. "You'll recognise them, Alex. Or I'll have you pulled off the investigation. Is that clear? Now let's go. There are three more child molesters waiting for us in holding."

He walked out without waiting for a reply. Alex stared after him, seething. To hell with him. To hell with Lopez and Szabeth. There was altogether too much politicking going on with this case. It wasn't supposed to be about point scoring, and who played with whose ball in whose backyard. It was about catching a killer.

"Alex!"

Alex scowled. "*Ja wohl, mein Fuhrer,*" he muttered, and stalked out after his partner.

Schanke pushed his fork through the mush on his plate and sighed. As an improvement on liquids from a plastic bag, it barely made the grade. As lunch, it sucked. What he really wanted was a souvlaki with extra onion. He wanted two. He wanted a double chocolate shake and a pepperoni pizza and a banana split.

He wanted out.

He looked at his watch. Geez. Another forty minutes until For Love Alone. You'd think with thirty seven channels there'd be *something* to watch until then. Problem was, tv was his escape from the real world, and he was out of the real world, trapped in a limbo of sponge baths and bedpans and cheerful damned nurses who smiled and said don't worry Mr Schanke this won't hurt a bit when they knew damned well it was going to hurt a lot.

And as for what was happening out there in the real world, well he wasn't going to think about that one, not for a minute, because then he would go nuts, stuck in here while some whacko was snatching kids and ... he was driving Myra around the twist, calling to make sure Jenny was okay. Myra was taking her to school every morning and picking her up every afternoon. No school buses, no unsupervised outings, till this thing was over. Jenny understood. She was scared, Myra said. Myra would know.

Hell of a way for his kid to grow up. His little princess. Jenny shouldn't know about shit like this. About being scared. About having to run if a stranger approached. Who was she supposed to run to, anyway? How was a nine year old girl meant to tell the difference between a bad grown up and a good one?

All grown ups were supposed to be good. That was the way it was suppposed to work. Used to work. The world was going to Hell in a handbasket and here *he* was, lying around some damned hospital waving it goodbye.

Helpless to save his own kid. His baby girl.

Schanke shoved the tray away and pummelled the pillows into a better shape. Doctor was coming by later, to talk about 'the next phase of his recovery'. If the next phase didn't include pulling on his walking shoes and hightailing it out of here Jack, he didn't want to know. Hell, forget hightaling. A slow, steady shuffle would do. Just so long as the hospital was in the rear vision mirror, and fading fast.

"Don?"

Schanke stared, surprised. "Alex! Come on in. Take a load off." Thank God. A distraction. The trouble with hospitals was that in between needle jabs and bedpans, you had too much time to think.

"Thanks," Alex said, and came in. Sure was a big son of a gun. The hospital chair creaked as he sat in it.

"Hey," said Schanke. "You look rough. Nick said you'd both been assigned to the task force. How's it going?

"Slowly."

"Any leads?"

"Some."

Schanke took a deep breath and shifted against the pillows. It was nearly time for the little white pills. "Any progress?"

Alex's expression was morose. "I guess."

"What does Nick think?"

"Not being a mind reader, I couldn't tell you."

Oh. Like that, was it? Carefully, Schanke reached for the glass of water on the night stand and eased his throat. It was still sore from that tube whatsit. Damn thing had scratched hell out of his tonsils.

"Is there a problem?" he asked. Very casual. Almost like he wasn't interested.

"No," said Alex. "Yes. Damn. It's nothing you need to worry about. You're convalescent."

"Convalescent and bored outa my skull," said Schanke. "You wannatalk, I can listen. I guess I know Knight better than just about anyone. Except Natalie. And she doesn't have to work with him."

Alex shoved himself out of the chair and measured the space between the bed and the window with angry steps. "He's -- I just -- it's like -- *God* !" He slapped the foot of the bed in passing. "Where the hell does he get off being so -- so damned *autocratic*?"

Schanke savoured the word with pleasure. "Autocratic, huh?" he murmured. "Geez. I always thought of it as plain old bossy ... but I think I like autocratic better. Has a certain ring to it." He nodded. "Yep. Autocratic just about sums him up." Rubbing gingerly at his shoulder he added, "So ... what? You had a disagreement?"

"Yeah."

Despite everything, Schanke had to grin. It felt like his face cracked. "And now you're wondering who authorised the transfer to Siberia, right?"

Alex slammed his shoulder blades against the wall and crossed his arms. "Something like that."

"So what was it about?" said Schanke. "No. Wait. Let me guess. You differed on a point of procedure? Asked him -- God forbid -- to produce some proof for one of his way out theories? Objected to being left in the car on your own in the middle of the road while he tried to hijack a moving bus?"

Alex stared. "What?"

Schanke waved his good hand. "Never mind. Long story. Point is, you're pissed. That's okay. Knight's a royal pain in the ass a lot of the time. He gets so far up my sinuses I'm looking at surgery."

"So how do you cope?"

"I say yes, sir, tug my forelock and get on with the job," said Schanke. "Look. Alex. He is what he is. He's never gonna change, any more than you or I are. You either deal with it, or you don't."

Alex unfolded his arms. "So how do you deal with it?"

"Damned if I know," said Schanke, with a one shouldered shrug. "I mean, you're right. He's a bossy, stubborn, secretive, stingy, manipulative, obsessive compulsive son of a bitch."

Alex laughed. "Come on. He's not that bad."

"Yeah, he is," said Schanke. "But he's also loyal, compassionate, dedicated, generous, honest and kind to small children and animals. I'd trust my daughter to him in a split second. In a tight spot there is no-one I'd rather have minding my back. Okay, so he ain't easy. Who is?"

Alex sat down again. "He says I'm losing my perspective."

"On what?"

"The child murders."

"Are you?"

"No. So I'm putting in some unpaid over time. So what? I want to nail the bastards responsible for this."

Schanke massaged the bridge of his nose. "Don't we all? I'd be on it twenty eight hours a day if I wasn't stuck in this gulag. The thought of those animals out there --" He stopped. Myra didn't want him thinking about it. She was threatening him with tofu again.

Alex said, "Who cares if I visit the families in my own time? God knows they're getting little enough support from anywhere else. What does it matter if I go over the crime scenes on my own? What's important here? Egos, or solving the case? Why is it all right for him to be dedicated, and not me?"

"Of course it's okay to be dedicated," Schanke soothed. "You stick to your guns. Hell, I've seen him chew the furniture over cases before now. Besides, his bark's worse than his bite. He's probably just uptight about testifying tomorrow night. Never met anyone who hates court as much as Nick."

"Why's that?"

Schanke went to shrug again, and stopped himself. The nurses were running late. If he'd been alone, he would have buzzed them. "Oh, he had a bad experience once. Got a long memory, has our Detective Knight. So if he's a bit tetchy, let it ride. And don't take it personally."

"If you say so."

"I say so." He reached for the water again, and drained the glass.

"Did you want more?" said Alex.

"Oh. Thanks." Not that water *without* the little white pills was going to do a lot, but maybe another four or five glasses would douse the fire in his belly.

As he refilled the pitcher in the adjoining bathroom, Alex said, "Are they letting you out for the trial?"

"Nope," said Schanke. "I gotta miss the ball, too. Myra and me had our costumes all picked out, too. I was going as Antony, and Myra was gonna be Cleopatra. She's going with Stonetree now. Mrs S is going to some high school reunion, or something. How about you? Are you going?"

Alex shut the bathroom door, put the filled pitcher on the night stand and sat again. "To the ball? Yeah. I'm taking Natalie Lambert."

Schanke hiccuped, and winced. "You are? Geez, I'll bet that put a few noses outa joint."

"Nick assures me they're just good friends," said Alex.

"Yeah," said Schanke. "Right."

Alex frowned. "To be honest, I feel real strange about dressing up and having a good time right now."

"Life has to go on," said Schanke. "Besides, it's a fund raiser. All those African kids starving to death. Rotting away from disease. Every little bit helps. You let them, these murders'll take over your life, Alex. You gotta keep some distance."

"How?" said Alex. "You haven't see them."

"I've seen dead kids," said Schanke. Burned. Crushed in cars. Beaten by parents. Ravaged by drugs.

Alex ran a thumbnail down the side seam of his Levis. "They found the fourth kid this morning. Michael Butler. Had to ID him with dental records."

"Jesus," breathed Schanke. "Where?"

"The docks."

To hell with his blood pressure. And with tofu. "So what have we got?"

"Hard to say. There's two separate semen samples so far."

Schanke folded his arms lightly across his stomach. "Serial killers usually fly solo."

"Could be a copy cat."

"Except that all the kids were snatched before the first body turned up, and none have been snatched since," Schanke said.

"Point taken." Alex grinned faintly. "You can take the cop out of the precinct, but you can't take the precinct out of the cop?"

"You said it."

"You miss it, don't you?" said Alex.

Schanke nodded. "Like breathing."

"Yeah."

"What about crime scene evidence?"

Alex sighed. "None of it adds up. Nothing ties in with anything else. We've got no witnesses. No probable suspects. The media's hysterical. The Mayor's rabid. Making all kinds of threats if we don't make an arrest by the end of the month. We're overloaded with committees. The brass all seem to want the glory for themselves and their own little patch of turf."

"Not Stonetree."

Alex nodded slowly. "Agreed. Not Stonetree. But the code says he can't speak against his own kind. He can see what's going on, though, and it's chewing him up."

"Yeah. It would."

There was a knock on the door, and Nurse Halloran came in, carrying a covered tray. "Sorry I'm so late, Don," she said. "There was an emergency in East Wing." Her smile became professional. "Excuse me," she said to Alex. "Would you mind waiting outside for a few moments?"

"Actually, I should be going," said Alex.

"Hey, no," Schanke protested. "You haven't told me everything yet."

The nurse uncovered the tray. "I hope you haven't been talking shop, detective?" she said disapprovingly. "You know what Myra said."

"Don't worry," said Schanke. "Please, Alex?"

He sounded desperate. He was desperate. Enough that he didn't care it showed.

"Okay," said Alex.

Schanke gulped down the precious pain killers, then lay back against the pillows, sucking a thermometer, as Lucy Halloran poked and prodded and felt his pulse.

"Hmm," she said.

"I'm fine," said Schanke. "Be a doll and send Alex back in, would you?"

""I shouldn't," the nurse began, then relented. "Two minutes. And I'll be timing you."

"You look pretty beat," said Alex, leaving the door open. "You should get some rest. There's no need for you to worry about this case. Concentrate on getting better."

Schanke punched the mattress. "No need? Jesus Christ, Haid! I got a nine year old daughter who's too scared to play in the back yard without her mother holding her hand! What else do I need?"

Alex shut the door. "Look. Sorry. I just meant --"

"Forget what you meant. I got fifteen years experience that could be helping to catch this -- this --" He struggled against obscenity. "I should be out there, working this case. Not stuck in here on my butt playing pincushion!"

"Don, you've been shot three times. You --"

"Don't tell me how many times I been shot!" Schanke retorted. "I was there. I can count. If there'd been time I woulda seen my life flashing before my eyes. Now I'm stuck in this mausoleum eyeballing crappy news reports which don't tell me diddly squat, and you're gonna stand there and tell me to rest and not *worry* ?"

Silence. Schanke rubbed his shoulder. Those sonsofbitches pills had better kick in soon or he was going to start throwing the furniture.

Alex ran his hand over his face. "What do you want me to do?"

Grunting, Schanke sat up a little. "Get me copies of the interview transcripts. Suspects, families, whoever. Crime scene reports. Evidence lists. ME reports. Anything you can get your hands on."

Alex stared at him.

"If you had a nine year old daughter, and someone out there was snatching, raping and torturing kids, would you want to lie on your ass in a hospital bed and wait for someone else to protect her?" said Schanke.

Alex shook his head.

"Well, I don't either."

"Okay," said Alex.

"When?"

"As soon as I can."

"Tonight. Please."

Alex turned, his hand on the door handle. "Okay. Tonight."

CHAPTER EIGHT

He was back just after nine that night. The hospital staff had given up trying to police Schanke's visiting hours. They just gazed beseechingly heavenwards and made shushing noises.

"It's not much, but it's a start," Alex said, handing him a buff envelope.

"Fantastic," said Schanke, pulling out the wad of photocopies and rifling through them. "You're a genius." What did he have here? Natalie's report on Tina Wallis. Interview with the guy who found the body. Three crime scene reports. Terrific. The trick now was to find somewhere to hide them where Myra the human bloodhound wouldn't sniff them out.

"No problem," said Alex.

Schanke spread the reports out on the mobile tray. "This really means a lot to me," he said. "I owe you big time. So if anyone gives you flak over this just --"

There was a knock on the door. It opened and Nick walked in. He looked like shit.

"Hey, Schanke, get your hands off the -- " He stopped. His smile faded. "Alex."

"Nick."

"What are you doing here?"

"Visiting. Is that a crime?"

"Of course not."

"Hey, Knight," said Schanke, and thought about hiding the evidence.

"Hi, Schank. What's that?" said Nick, crossing to the foot of the bed.

So much for hiding the evidence. Schanke took a deep breath, ready to speak, as Nick picked up the wino's interview from the mobile tray.

Schanke said, "Just some stuff Alex brought in for me."

"Stuff?" Nick flicked through the appropriated material. "Suspect interviews, autopsy reports, crime scene descriptions?" He looked up. Looked at Alex. "All this is restricted information. It should never have left the precinct."

Schanke said, "Now, Nick, before you lose your cool, let me explain. I--"

"Keep out of this, Schanke."

"No, I won't keep out of this. I--"

Nick looked at him. "Shut up." He turned back to Alex, put the reports back on the rolling tray table. and folded his arms over his chest. "Where were you this afternoon?"

Alex shrugged. "Out."

"Out where?"

"Am I answerable to you for where I spend my off duty time?"

"Don't play games, Alex. Answer the question."

Schanke went cold. There was a quality to Nick's anger that never failed to raise the hairs on the back of his neck.

He'd only ever seen him close to losing it once ... and he made it a point never to think about that night. About the sight of Nick one handedly holding a fully grown man out a window over a drop of some ten storeys. Or about the fact that one handedly he'd pulled him back inside the room and then tossed him over a bed to the far wall, the way some people toss a chewed apple core.

No, he never thought about that. Thinking about stuff like that could make you nuts.

But now all his little alarm bells were ringing at once, because Nick's face was ominous, and there was a look in his partner's eyes he'd never seen before.

Alex said, "You're the one playing games. You know damned well where I was. I went to see Mr and Mrs Butler."

"They called after you left. Wanted to know how long you'd be keeping the photo."

"Who told you?"

"It doesn't matter. The point is, you went to see them. Directly after I'd made it clear that our concern is with Tina Wallis, and Tina Wallis alone."

Alex shoved his hands in his pockets. "Your concern may start and finish with Tina Wallis. I like to take a broader view of the issue.

Schanke pursed his lips. Time for Knight's voice to drop a register. Always did, when he was seriously pissed.

Nick said, "The last thing this investigation needs is a hot dog."

Schanke winced. That was three registers. Whoops.

Alex was looking pretty angry himself. "That's bullshit. I'm not a hot dog. I'm concerned."

"No. *I'm* concerned. *You're* obsessed."

"And you're out of line," Alex snapped. "You're my partner, not my keeper. I thought I'd been clear about that."

Nick said, "Watch your step. One word from me and you're back writing moving violations."

Alex crossed his arms, his expression contemptuous. "I wondered how long it'd take you to start making threats. Bully the suspects by all means. But you're wasting your breath with me."

Nick stepped close. "What is it with you, Alex? You think you're invisible? You think people haven't noticed what's going on? You're pulling double shifts one out of two. You're harassing the lab staff. You're sitting in on every autopsy. You think Lopez is the only person to say something to me? It's only a matter of time before Prescott gets told. He probably knows already."

"And if he says anything about it, I'll handle it," said Alex. "It has nothing to do with you."

Schanke sat back in horrified fascination. Amazing. Alex was completely oblivious to all the warning signals. The guy was either dumber than deadwood or someone should hand him a medal for conspicuous bravery.

"It has *every* --"

"No," interrupted Alex. "It doesn't. It's none of your business, Nick. Okay? Butt out."

"What?" said Nick.

Schanke closed his eyes. Ouch. That was the sound of a camel's back, breaking.

"You heard me," said Alex.

Nick took a handful of shirt in his fist and drove Alex backwards into the wall with a thud that shook the curtains.

"It is my business. Dragging Schanke into this *makes* it my business."

The private room's door shoved wide and an irate nurse demanded, "What is going on here? This is a hospital, not a --"

Nick turned. "*Get out.*"

The nurse gasped. Schanke leaned precariously sideways and said urgently, "It's okay, Kim. I'll explain later. Just give us a minute would you? Please?"

"I can't just --

"Please" said Schanke. The door closed. He said, "Nick, that's enough."

"I said keep out of it, Schanke."

"No, I won't keep out of it. I asked Alex to bring me the reports."

Nick stared. "*You* asked --"

"That's right. So calm down. Okay? Just back off." He used his right-now-young-lady-and-don't-even-*think*-about-pulling-a-face-behind-my-back tone of voice. Met Nick's white hot glare without flinching.

A miracle happened. Nick looked away. *He looked away.* God Almighty, Don Schanke had stared down Nick Knight. He could feel a relapse coming on. He needed a nurse. Preferably a young one, with good legs.

Nick released his fistful of shirt. Glanced at Alex. Stepped back.

Schanke said, "He's right, Alex. You've gone beyond eager. Way beyond. You want to tell us what's happening here? We'll help, if we can."

"No one can help," said Alex. He pushed himself away from the wall. Slumped into the visitor's chair, defeated.

"Try us," suggested Schanke.

Still staring at the floor Alex said, "My last year in college my niece Molly was abducted, raped and strangled. She was nine years old. The bastard who killed her threw her out of the car and drove over her, to get away. They never caught who did it."

Schanke's stomach twisted. Jesus. No wonder Haid was taking this case personally.

Alex looked up, then. The pain in his face was raw. "Her death blasted my world to pieces. It destroyed my sister's marriage. Put our mother in an early grave. Our father in a home. He doesn't recognise anybody any more. It's been six years and we're still not over it."

"I'm sorry," said Nick.

Alex pressed his hands between his knees. "I know what these families are going through. I know what their nights are like. I've lain awake hour after hour and listened to Molly's voice screaming for the monster not to hurt her. For someone to help her. Save her. And nobody did. Molly, Tina, Marco, the others, they're butchered with less mercy than we show to a hog and for the rest of our lives we have to live with that. But we can't. So we die with it, a little bit each day."

Schanke looked at Nick. Waited for him to speak. He said nothing.

Alex stirred. "So I'm sorry if you think I'm doing too much, Nick. But I think I'm entitled to take this one personally."

"Too personally," said Nick. "You shouldn't be on the task force at all."

"Name me one cop, just one, who doesn't see his own kid's face when he looks at the photos of the victims," said Alex.

Nick hesitated. "You have to find a way to detach yourself from this."

"If by detach you mean stop feeling, I can't. I won't. If we allow ourselves to become desensitised to murder, we'll be just like the murderers."

Nick said, "Maybe. But if you don't keep your distance, you'll burn out."

"So I burn out. At least I'll have gone down in a good cause."

Schanke huffed impatiently. "Alex, we hear you. And you're right, up to a point. But you're not thinking straight on this one. Getting on the wrong side of the brass is counter productive. Treading on your buddies' toes is plain stupid. We all want to stop these whackos. But there's a right way and a wrong way to go about it."

Alex shook his head. "And I believe that what I'm doing is right." Glancing at his watch, he stood. "I have to go. I'm meeting Eddie for a drink before our shift starts. He wants to talk some firm dates at his club."

Nick said, "Forget work tonight. I'll square it with Prescott. Go away and think about what Schanke said. He's right. Unless you find a way to deal with this, you're off the case."

Alex stared at the floor for a long moment. Then he looked up. "Do as you're told or else?

"No. Do the right thing, by yourself and the investigation."

"The gospel according to Nick." He shoved his hands in his pockets. "I'll take it under advisement. See you, Don."

"Sure," said Schanke. "Thanks for dropping by."

Alex closed the door quietly behind him. Schanke watched Nick drop into the chair and flatten his palms to his face. Try to rub the tiredeness away.

"Poor bastard. Life really sucks sometimes, doesn't it?" said Schanke. He considered Nick. "You were a bit rough on him, weren't you?"

Nick lowered his hands. "What he's doing is stupid."

Schanke nodded. "Yeah. Right. And of course *you've* never done a stupid thing in your whole life, have you?"

Nick sat back and glared, unimpressed.

"Come on," Schanke said. "Cut him a little slack, Knight. We've all gotten a little too close to a case in our time. And God knows he's entitled. If I lost Jenny the way he lost his niece ... the way these other parents have lost their kids ..."

Nick looked at him. "You think I care less because I have no child?"

Schanke met his gaze steadily. "I think you care differently."

A stark silence. Schanke reached for his glass of water and considered Nick over its rim. "You sure the real reason you're pissed isn't because he's taking Natalie to the ball instead of you?"

Nick pushed out of the chair and stood by the window, staring out. "Of course it's not."

"You absolutely sure?"

Nick sighed. "Schank."

Schanke put the empty glass aside and raised his hands. "I know, I know, I know. You and Nat are just good friends. The question is, why?"

Nick didn't look at him. "I'm not the right man for Natalie."

"No? Then who are you right for? That female barracuda from the Raven?"

His only reaction was one of amusement. "We're two of a kind, Schanke."

Schanke jabbed a finger at him. "As soon as I get outta here, we're gonna do some work on that low self esteem of yours. So. Do you think he's serious about her? Alex, I mean. About Natalie."

"I think he could be."

"And what about Natalie?"

"We haven't discussed it."

No, I'll just bet you haven't. Schanke could have hit him. "Well I still think you should be taking her to the ball."

"Alex asked her first."

"You could have asked her second! Hell, we've known about it for ever, you could have asked her first! That ball's gonna be a lot of fun, Nick. You familiar with the term fun? In the practical as opposed to theoretical sense, I mean?"

Nick smiled. "Yes, Schanke. I am. And as a matter of fact, I am going to the ball."

Schanke goggled at him. "You are? Who with?" Nick said nothing. Schanke thought for a moment, then choked. "You're kidding! You're taking the Hungarian barracuda?"

Nick sat down again. "I'll tell her you said that."

"Don't you dare!" He flopped back into his pillows. "I can't believe it. You're going to the ball. And I'm still gonna be here, in Stalag 17. It isn't fair! Hey, do you need a costume? I was going as Mark Antony. You'd look so cute in that little yoga thing –"

"It's called a toga, Schanke, and thanks but no thanks. We've got clothes."

Schanke shook his head. "You sly dog. Who would've thought --" He stopped. Squinted suspiciously at Nick. "Does Natalie know?" Nick looked at his hands. Schanke let out an exasperated breath. "I don't believe you," he said. "You know, for a smart guy, Nick, you can be as thick as two short planks."

Stung, Nick looked up. "Meaning?"

"Meaning that I'll bet my mortgage Nat was waiting for you to ask her, and the only reason she said she'd go with Haid was because she figured you were never gonna pop the question."

"That's ridiculous," said Nick. "Besides, I thought women were supposed to be liberated these days. If she really wanted to go to the damned ball with me, why didn't she ask me herself?"

Schanke laughed. "Oh, boy. If you believe that, you're in more trouble than I thought."

Nick pushed out of the chair. "It's academic anyway, Schanke. She's going with Alex. I'm taking Janette."

"And I would give my entire BTO collection to be a fly on the wall," said Schanke. Nick looked at him. Schanke raised a hand. "Okay. Okay. It's your funeral. Mrs Schanke's little Donald has said all he's going to say."

"Good."

Schanke rearranged his blankets. "So. You all set for tomorrow night?"

"What?"

"The trial?" said Schanke patiently. "You know. Where justice triumphs and evil is vanquished? Or at least gets put behind bars for twenty years."

"The trial," said Nick. "Yeah. We're set."

"You'll ace it. The punk is history. You have my deepest thanks in advance."

Nick's smile was strained. "You getting psychic in your old age?"

"Hey, Nick, come on. We've got the guy dead to rights," Schanke protested. "He is going down. Trust me. I can feel it."

"That'll be your stitches pulling." He looked out of the window. "It's late. I'd better get to work."

"Say hi to the folks back home for me," said Schanke.

"Sure." Nick patted his arm in passing, then hesitated. Looked at the reports, still sitting on the mobile tray. "You could have asked me for those, you know. I would have brought them in for you."

"I know. And if you'd been here when I thought of it, I would have," said Schanke. "It was just a spur of the moment thing."

Nick nodded. "I didn't think about you feeling left out. Sorry."

"Forget it. Thanks for dropping by. And Nick?"

At the door Nick paused, and turned.

"Go easy on Alex. He seems like a nice guy."

"He is," said Nick. "But that doesn't mean he should be on the case."

"Come on," said Schanke. "You can't say he's not entitled. And we were all young and keen once, remember?"

Nick nodded. "Barely. I'll see you, Schank."

Schanke stared at the closed door, frowning. Inched himself under the covers and surrendered to a yawn. Weariness hadn't quite smothered his surprise.

Nick was taking Janette to the ball?

Incredible.

And he hadn't told Natalie.

Dumb. Very, very dumb.

After meeting with Eddie, and tentatively booking in gigs for early next month, Alex spent the night working on his own. He visited the Wallises again and listened to them tear each other to pieces. Then he stopped by the Castelli's home and sat with them as they talked about their youngest child.

After that, he just drove around. Aimlessly. Getting a feel for his new home town. Imprinting the streets so he'd know the shortest way around in an emergency. All the time, his run in with Nick burned in the back of his mind.

In the end he drove to 101 Gateway and dozed in the car until Nick came home.

"I thought you were taking the night off?" Nick said, after tapping on the driver's side window and waiting for Alex to wind it down.

"Did you?" said Alex. "Look. Can we talk?"

"Not out here, we can't," said Nick. He headed for the security door into his apartment.

He'd had more gracious invitations, but what the heck. He pushed and pulled his protesting body out of the car and jogged to catch up.

"Do you want a coffee?" said Nick, tossing his keys onto the table.

"Sure. White, one sugar." He surrendered to the luxury of the couch as Nick rattled about in the kitchen.

"You're not having one?" he asked, taking the offered cup. The aroma made his head spin.

"I don't drink it."

"You don't know what you're missing," said Alex.

Nick sat down. "So talk."

Alex sighed. "I never intended to make more trouble, Nick. But you have to understand. When a person you love has been murdered, all you want is for someone to listen. You don't want sympathy or advice or a run down on Kubler-Ross' interpretation of the grieving process. You just want someone to listen. It's as simple and as complicated as that."

"So who did you listen to last night?"

Alex swallowed more coffee. "The Wallises, first. They're not doing too well. Tina was an only child. This is the kind of thing that makes or breaks a marriage. And theirs is breaking." He paused, remembering. Heidi and Bill, and the bloody destruction of their relationship after Molly's death. His fingers tightened on the coffee cup. "Then I went to see the Castellis. They're doing okay. They read me all his school reports, and showed me the family photo album. Then we watched home movies till two. He was a great kid. A natural clown. We laughed, and laughed."

He looked up, then, expecting to find censure in Nick's face. Instead there was a smile. Affection. He said, "I'm sorry if I was hard on you."

Alex shrugged. "You were copping flak because of me. I'm sorry for that. But don't expect me to back off this investigation, because I won't do it. I can't. I will try to be more diplomatic, though."

"Say 'excuse me' before you ride roughshod over anyone else?"

"Something like that."

"Great." Nick sat back, and his smile faded. "Is Molly the reason you left the seminary?"

Alex put his empty cup on the table. He nodded. "Yes."

"You --" Nick hesitated. "You lost your faith?"

"Misplaced it," said Alex.

Nick rested his head against the back of his chair. "The eternal question. Why do bad things happen to good people."

Alex grimaced. "You found an answer yet?"

"I was hoping you could tell me."

"Sorry," said Alex. "But I'm working on it."

"Let me know what you find out," Nick said. He clasped his hands in his lap. "So. Your faith didn't remain misplaced."

Alex considered him. "No," he said. "It took time, but I found it again."

"How?"

It was a deceptively simple question, but beneath it ran a swift and deep desperation. Alex, remembering the paintings, shifted against the soft leather. Leaned forward with his fingers steepled, his elbows sunk into his thighs'

"I couldn't stay mad at God forever. I tried. Molly was ..." He cleared his throat. "I loved her like the daughter I thought I'd never have. When she died, I --" He sat back. "I lived on rage. For a very long time. Then one day I was walking past this church, and I went in. Started to pray. To cry. And I knew, don't ask me how, that God was as sorry about Molly as I was."

"But not responsible."

"It was a human who killed her."

"And so you found your faith again. Just like that."

Alex shrugged. "Faith is a strange thing, Nick. Very personal. I can't explain it. But I think -- I think I needed to wander, on my own, before I could appreciate what I'd turned my back on. I don't know. Maybe we all need that. Maybe that's what the expulsion from Eden was all about."

"Wander for how long?" said Nick.

"For as long as it takes us to learn our lessons, I guess."

"And have you learned yours?"

Alex considered. "Some of them. I think. You?"

Nick stared into the distance. "I have learned things ..." His voice trailed away. At last he roused. Regarded Alex, his expression sombre. "Why do you think people kill?"

Alex snorted. "If you listen to the killers it's because they had an unhappy childhood. 'My father never told me he loved me, my mother never baked me chocolate cupcakes. I got in with the wrong crowd.'"

"But what do you think?"

"I think we're responsible for our own actions. In the end, we do what we choose to do. Nobody makes us."

"No," said Nick. "Nobody makes us."

Alex sighed. "Do I sound hard? Judgemental? UnChristian, even? I'm sorry. Maybe I do take too much of an Old Testament line on this. But unless you've lost someone to murder, you can't really understand how it feels."

Nick stared at his hands. "You're right. Only another victim knows how it feels to be a victim. And maybe ... only one murderer can truly understand another."

Alex winced. "I don't ever want to understand that."

"No," said Nick. "I don't think you do." He stood. "I gotta sleep. If you like, stay and practice on the Steinway. Just make sure you lock up on the way out."

"You mean it?" Alex asked, surprised. "The noise won't bother you?"

"I sleep like the dead," said Nick. "And besides, what you make isn't noise. Just do me one favour. Don't play any hymns."

Alex grinned. "It's a deal."

Alone with the piano, Alex limbered up with a few scales. Quietly. Then he wandered through his favourite Brahms waltzes, letting the music unravel the tension in his neck and back and shoulders. The melodies soothed him, charmed him.

He began to play Chopin's Prelude in E Minor. A melancholy piece, with undertones of foreboding. One of those compositions he loved yet could never quite master. Why, he couldn't figure. It only took two

minutes to play, for crying out loud, but somehow it always managed to defeat him. Right about the one and a half minute mark.

Four times he stumbled to a halt, his fingers fumbling amateurishly for the right succession of notes. He knew the damned piece off by heart. Why wouldn't it play the way it was supposed to?

"You're trying too hard," said Nick.

Alex nearly fell off the piano stool. "Bloody hell, Nick! You nearly gave me a cardiac!"

Clad in black silk pyjamas, Nick just smiled. "Get up."

He watched as Nick settled himself before the baby grand. Without looking around he said, "I told you before. It isn't for analysing. It's for feeling." He lifted his hands, and began to play.

It was as though he were hearing the prelude for the very first time. The notes flowed into one another, rich and round and inevitable. All of life's slings and arrows wreathed in audible sorrow. The music surged, crested, held its breath ... and sighed into silence.

Touched beyond words, he listened as Nick played on. The sad swiftness of the music pulled him under like a rip and he drowned, unprotesting.

Half way though the Ballade in G minor, he left. Nick had long since forgotten his presence. Looking at him it was impossible to feel like anything but an intruder. He closed the security door behind him, and returned to his car.

Leaning against the hood he tilted his face to the sun.

Funny. He'd never really appreciated sunshine until now, locked into the nocturnal rhythms of the night shift. Thank God it wasn't a permanent arrangement.

In his head he could still hear the immaculate progression of Chopin's Ballade. With his eyes closed he could see Nick's face, old beyond its years, communing with dead Frederic.

When the Ballade was finished, he drove home.

Natalie smothered a yawn behind her hand. Night court was a bitch. Night shift was fine: nothing like autopsying a semi-gelatinous corpse to keep your eyes open. In court though, the air was warm and slightly stuffy, and she had nothing to do but sit and wait. She probably wouldn't be asked to testify, probably they'd accept the medical evidence as stipulated, but she'd worn her 'testifying in court' suit just in case. Rumour had it that the defense attorney, Marcel Reynard, was a newly qualified hot dog with a point to prove and a reputation to build.

She was glad Myra wasn't there. Schanke had begged her not to go and since it meant leaving a poorly sleeping Jenny with a babysitter, Myra had given in. Not, Natalie suspected, without relief. Myra wasn't the blood thirsty type. So long as the perp got sent down, she'd be more than happy to hear about it secondhand.

Alex was absent, too. Following up on the taskforce paperwork. Nick hadn't seemed to mind. Had hardly seemed to notice or care that she was there, for that matter. Their wait outside the court room had been monosyllabic.

He was walking up to take the stand now. He looked wired. Also tanked up. It was hard to blame him. They'd already seen Schanke's videotaped statement. He 'd looked awful. Now Nick was going to have to go through it all again. Under the circumstances, an extra half a bottle wasn't unreasonable.

Except she suspected, with the expertise born of much observation, that he'd had a lot more than just one extra half bottle. Which meant another month's data would be screwed up yet again. Meant also that his system would be buzzing, all his senses and instincts fully charged. He'd probably have to fly around the loft for half of what remained of the night just to get to sleep.

Their eyes met as he entered the witness box and took his oath. He flinched as he placed his hand on the bible. She smiled encouragingly, and gave him a very small thumbs up. He smiled back, a strained quirk of the lips which appeared and disappeared almost immediately.

Elaine Summers, the Crown Prosecutor, let him tell his story without interruptions. Natalie, watching very closely, saw all the signs of stress she'd learned to recognise over the course of their friendship. The increased pallor, the clipped sentences, the deepened tones and stiff formality of his speech. To recall the shooting was to relive the unspeakable act which he had so nearly committed.

Oh, weren't she and Alex and Stonetree and anyone else in his particular orbit going to have fun over the next few days. Nick's bouts of self-hatred could go on for weeks. What a shame she couldn't post storm warnings for everybody.

Elaine said, "I have no further questions, Your Honour."

"Very well," said the judge. "Mr Reynard?"

Reynard bounced to his feet, an aggressive little rubber ball of a man. Nick touched the back of his hand to his mouth, then lowered it to his lap. Waited.

Reynard came out from behind his desk. "I can tell from your testimony, detective, that the night in question was very upsetting. Am I right?"

"Yes," said Nick. "One person died, and another was critically wounded. Those are both upsetting events."

Reynard nodded sagely. "Yes, they are. And I'm sure you very much want to punish the person responsible, don't you?"

"That's why I'm here," said Nick.

"Yes, it is," Reynard agreed.

Suddenly Natalie wasn't feeling tired any more. She sat forward, catching Stonetree's eye. He shrugged. She shrugged back, feeling sick. This lawyer had something nasty planned. She'd been on the wrong end of a cross examination often enough to know when something bad was coming down the line.

Nick knew it too. She saw him take an extra breath that he didn't need, and place his finger tips very deliberately on the table top in front of him.

"Your Honour ..." said Elaine.

The judge nodded. "Get to the point, Mr Reynard."

"Yes, Your Honour," Reynard said obediently. "Detective, you took an oath here tonight to tell the truth, didn't you?"

"That's right."

"You promised you would tell the truth, and nothing but the truth. Isn't that so?"

"Yes," said Nick.

Then Natalie knew what was coming. So did Nick. His eyes closed briefly, then opened. Stonetree sat immobile; only the set of his shoulders betrayed his feelings.

Reynard took a moment to stroll past the seated ranks of jurors. One forefinger pressed momentarily against his lips. "Tell me, Detective Knight, is telling the truth important to

You bastard, Natalie raged. *You sneaky, efficient, unscrupulous bastard.*

"Yes," said Nick, white to the lips.

"Oh?" Reynard's tone was politely surprised. He glanced at the jury. "Is this court to assume then, detective, that you've had a change of ... shall we say, philosophy, since you admitted to making a false statement in the case of the Crown vs Murray Kozack?"

"*Objection!*" Elaine cried, leaping to her feet.

"Goes to the credibility of he witness, Your Honour," Reynard responded smoothly, almost apologetically. "It is a matter of public record that Detective Knight came within a whisker of perjuring himself last year in order to gain a conviction in the trial of Murray Kozack. And he had nothing like the incentive then that he does now: the chance to avenge the near murder of his partner."

The judge pondered. "I'll allow it," she said at last. "The witness will answer the question." Elaine sat down again and tossed her pen to the desk in disgust.

Natalie sank her teeth into her lip. Had Nick expected this? It had never crossed her mind. She felt winded, gut punched. She glanced quickly at Stonetree. His head was bowed.

"Detective?" said Reynard. His hand indicated the jury, the court room in general. "We're waiting."

"What was the question?" said Nick.

Reynard's mild voice sharpened. "Have you told the truth here tonight?"

Nick's chin lifted. "Yes. I have."

Another glance at the jury. "And you expect us to believe that?"

"Yes. I do."

"Because you promised that you would?'

"Yes."

Reynard's expression was politely disbelieving now. "Even though, in the past, you promised to tell the truth and then lied?"

Nick hesitated. Seemed to be searching for words. "That was a mistake," he said at last.

Reynard turned his back to Nick, contemptuously dismissive Shared an eloquent look with the jury., and faced Nick again. "Yes, it certainly was, detective, but that isn't what I asked you."

Nick cleared his throat. Sat very straight and still. "I saw the defendant run out of the store seconds after the shots were fired. I saw him throw the gun down next to the dumpster. I identified him in a line up of suspects."

Reynard closed the space between them. Placed both hands on the witness box and leaned in. "Even though, by your own admission, it was a dark night and you only saw the suspect for a moment before you went into the store to see if your partner was all right. Given all of that, you still maintain beyond any shadow of a doubt that my client is the man you saw?"

Nick had not moved an inch. He met Reynard's fierce eyes steadily. "He is the man."

Reynard's eyebrows climbed. He stepped back. Swept the jury with his gaze, then looked at Nick. "Well. Far be it from me to doubt the word of a man under oath."

"Objection," said Elaine.

"I have no further questions," said Reynard.

"The witness may step down," said the judge.

Released at last, Nick came and sat beside her. "You done good," she whispered.

He looked right through her. "I know what I saw. I saw ... what I saw."

She took his icy hand in hers. Could feel the deep seated tremor within him. Willed some of her warmth into his chill flesh, her warmth and her strength and her implacable, foolish faith in him. "I know," she said. "And the jury knows it too. You'll see."

As she'd hoped, she didn't have to testify ... but only because the judge intervened. Clearly, Reynard was determined to milk every opportunity to grandstand. How she loathed him. Her evidence was stipulated. The prosecution rested its case. Reynard got up to defend.

His client, far from shooting people that night, had been shooting bottles in a vacant lot. A well lit vacant lot. On the way home someone had accosted him and stolen his gun. Sadly, there had been no convenient witnesses with extraordinary eyesight. The unfortunate police officer injured in the lamentable robbery was unable to remember the face of the man who shot him. The convenience store security camera had malfunctioned earlier that evening, so there was no taped evidence to support the police claim that his client was the guilty party.

What this boiled down to was a simple case of a policeman's word against his client's. This whole proceeding was a miscarriage of justice, a vendetta against an innocent young man, a crusade by angry policemen looking for revenge. It was as simple as that.

Then came closing remarks. The jury retired for all of fifteen minutes and came back with a guilty verdict.

"Good job," said Stonetree to Elaine.

She smiled. "I'll have to keep an eye on that little weasel. This should never have gone to trial. But he refused to plead out the case." She laughed. "Schanke should be pleased. Twenty to life. Better than I'd hoped for."

"Most satisfactory," said Stonetree. "Well, I'd better get back to work. Nick --" He considered Nick for a moment. "Take the rest of the night. I'll clear it with Prescott."

Nick shook his head. "No, really Captain, I --"

"Take it."

"Okay."

Stonetree smiled. "You handled yourself real well, Detective. Real well."

Elaine patted Nick on the back. "Didn't he just? Captain, walk me to my car, will you? I want to discuss the case against Miriam White with you."

Natalie threaded her arm through Nick's. "You okay?"

He thought for a moment. Looked down at her. "No."

She went back to the loft with him, and sat quietly in a corner as he prowled, or tortured discordant music from the piano, stared out of the window at the city lights, or flung himself onto the settee, only to roll off and begin to prowl again. She dozed a little, here and there, and thought at one time that he came to rest on the arm of her chair, and touched her hair with an infinitely gentle hand.

Of course, she could have just dreamed that.

When dawn came he collapsed, and she covered him with a blanket and closed the shutters. Kissed his cold cheek once and drove slowly home.

CHAPTER NINE

The next evening, Nick drove to the Raven to collect Janette for the ball. It felt most peculiar, wearing his formal clothes again. He'd grown used to silk and soft cotton. Had forgotten how close was the embrace of the vest, the cut away tail coat. How much stuff went along with the correct attire: top hat, studs at throat and wrists, gloves, amber headed cane and, of course, the heavy satin lined cape. Natalie would no doubt have something witty to say about Bela Lugosi.

He felt a twinge of unease. Natalie. He'd meant to tell her about tonight. Meant to mention, ever so casually and just in passing, that he and Janette were going. But life had gone out of control: Tina Wallis, Alex's one man crusade, the trial. The right moment just hadn't presented itself, and it wasn't the sort of thing he could call her up and announce out of the blue.

Besides, being brutally honest, how much was she likely to care, anyway? It was clear how Alex felt about Natalie, and she had made no attempt to snap him into line. She, on the contrary, was encouraging him. As was her right. No arguments on that score.

Okay. She didn't much care for Janette. But what was he supposed to do. Pretend he didn't have any vampire friends, just because he was trying to come back across? Never mind that he and Janette had gone decades at a stretch without seeing each other. Or that their relationship was a complicated tangle of love and hunger and anger and guilt and time that defied all rational explanation. They had ties Nat couldn't possibly understand if she lived to be a hundred. That wasn't her fault, but it was an inescapable fact.

If ever he did find the way back, then he would have no choice but to sever the bonds they shared. Or the crossing itself would sever them without any effort from him. But until then ... Janette was the only person left who truly knew him. Understood him. Accepted him for exactly what he was, and had been.

He could not, *would* not, reject her too. Besides, hadn't he already tried, more than once? Tried, and failed. Lover, sister, enemy and friend: she had been all these, in all the eras he had known. For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in blood lust and in death, they were bound.

And it had been such a long time since he had danced, really danced, with Janette.

He parked the car around the side entrance to the club and went in. Janette was waiting for him in her office. Once, the sight of her would have taken his breath away. Now, he kissed her lightly on both cheeks and said, "I know that dress."

She smiled. "You should. You paid for it. As I recall it was outrageously expensive, but you didn't bat an eye. You've always been such a gallant." Her fingers smoothed the claret coloured velvet. The bodice was sewn with seed pearls, and clasped her diminutive rib cage as though it had been painted on. The skirt flowed smoothly over her hips and to the ground in an extravagant excess of fabric.

"You should wear red more often," said Nick. "You look magnificent."

"I do, don't I?" she agreed. "I miss dressing up. The modern era has no concept of true fashion."

He watched her make last minute adjustments in the mirror. Her hair was arranged on top of her head in one of those intricate confections he could never quite understand. Pearls dangled from her ears, and she had forsworn her black velvet choker for more pearls, this time a twisted double strand whose lustre warmed the dead white skin of her throat. They fastened in front with a large diamond and ruby clasp. No doubt everyone, except Natalie of course, would think they were fake.

"Modest as ever," he said, and kissed her again. "We'd better go. The Caddy's just outside."

"I can't possibly travel in your car, Nicola," she objected. "My dress will be crushed beyond redemption. It was bad enough in a carriage, and the interior of a car is even smaller."

He sighed. "Well, it's a little too far to walk."

Her eyebrows escalated. "We'll fly."

"What? Janette, I don't think so."

"Then I won't go."

He stared at her. "You're impossible. What about your hair? Won't flying ruin it?"

She picked up her gloves from the desk top and began to

smooth them onto her hands. "Fashion aside, the twentieth century does have some things to recommend it," she said. "ATM's. IBM. Triple-H S."

"Triple-H S?"

She smiled. "High Hold Hair Spray. Shall we go?"

He had last flown with Janette in Venice. Summer, 1826. She had worn gold that year. Memories flooded him as they skimmed the Toronto roof tops, rising fast into the night.

They'd been lovers at the time. The street lamps of Venice had flickered below, rippling yellow light over the canals, throwing shadows onto the walls of the buildings as they took to the sky side by side.

Free of deception, of games and the need for vigilance, they had romped through the warm Italian air like children released from the school room. LaCroix had gone to Milan on business. There was no one to chide, to disparage, to punish. They had the stolen moment, unclouded by memory, untarnished by blame for slights both real and imagined. Over nearly six centuries they had loved and fought and parted and forgiven. Then, laughing, they had flown, and given no thought to what might happen next.

He felt Janette's eyes on him, and looked at her.

"Venice," she said, her eyes flaming.

"Venice," he agreed, smiling, knowing she could read him now as she had not for an age.

They met an owl, and Janette chased it. He chased her.

"We don't have time for games," he said, grabbing her ankle and halting her pell mell progress.

"*Au contraire, mon amour,*" she retorted. "Time is all that we have. Time, and this." She snapped her ankle free and hovered before him. "You're a fool, to even think of giving it up."

He stopped her lips with his fingers. "*Ah, non, cherie. Pas ce soir.*"

She sighed. "Nicola ..."

"Please?"

Eyes downcast she pouted. Her fingers came up to adjust his bow tie. She sighed again. "*D'accord. Pas ce soir.*"

Their eyes met. Suspended far above the teeming city, with the night currents stirring their clothes, they searched each other's faces for the truths that could never be spoken aloud.

They kissed. Gently, at first, in recognition of all that lay between them. But gentleness had never been enough for either of them. Through his own clothing he could feel the pearls of her bodice, impacted by passion. Blood was not the only thing he denied himself. Nor was it the only thing for which he hungered.

She was laughing, her head thrown back before the onslaught of his kisses. His lips plundered her lips, her throat, the vulnerable juncture of neck and shoulder, the taut swell of her breasts above the slashing red line of velvet.

Desire was a conflagration fed by abstinence. Her hands were on him, possessed of an intimate knowledge that threatened the vestiges of his sanity.

But it was Janette who pulled away. Who imprisoned his altered face between her hands, and murmured against his lips, "Nicola. We're falling."

Passion doused, he returned to himself. Twisted aside just in time to avoid impalement on a telegraph pole. Janette was laughing again. He felt her gloved fingers close tightly about his wrist. Then she was swooping upwards once more, towing him in her wake. After a moment he had regained control and she was able to safely let go of him.

She was still laughing. "Nicola, Nicola, you were always so easily distracted, *mon cher.*"

"And you, *ma petite choux*, were always so easily amused," he retorted. Reaching out his arm he ensnared her waist. Pulled her close so they were flying side by side. Her arm rested across his back, and her cheek was pressed to his.

"Just like the old days, *n'est-ce pas* ?"she murmured.

"*Oui,*" he agreed.

"Oh, Nicola. I believe I am happy," said Janette. "I think -- yes, I think I have almost forgotten how it feels. Have you?"

"I've been remembering lately." He felt her stiffen, try to pull away. He wouldn't let her.

Bitterly she said, "I see. So you can be happy with your mortal friends, is that it?"
He kissed her cheek. "And with you, *mignonne.* And with you."

Waiting with the rest of the crowd in the foyer of the Entertainment Centre, Natalie jiggled, just a little, and grinned to herself as the heavy beading of her 1920's style ball gown clacked and clunked in a most satisfying way. The obligatory headband, on the other hand, was very strange. And she felt like a circus horse, with the feathery ornament thing pinned behind one ear.

She was glad to be here. More than comfortable in Alex's company. Aware that they were rapidly sliding past 'just good friends', and welcomed it. But still ... her treacherous thoughts betrayed her.

If only ...

And if wishes were horses beggars' feet would never touch the ground. Who knew what memories of a night such as this Nick had, and did not want disturbed from their uneasy rest?

Beside her, spats and all, Alex was checking out the other costumes. "Eight Napoloeons, fourteen Caesars and I think -- but of course I could be wrong -- six Alexander the Greats. Now what does that tell you about the aspirations of this fine city's most prominent male citizens?"

"Nothing I want to think about for more than three seconds," said Natalie. "We also have assorted Queen Elizabeth the Firsts, lots of Marie Antoinettes, several Empress Josephines, a smattering of Pocahontases and far too many Cleopatras. Aren't you glad we decided to be generic?"

"Yes, it was a very good idea of mine, I thought," said Alex.

"Huh," said Natalie. "Now, detective, we are going to have fun tonight, aren't we? We're going to leave work where it belongs, in the lab, or wherever, and not worry about things, just for one night. Aren't we?"

He looked down at her. "Yes, ma'am."

"Good."

They inched their way to the main doors. Their tickets were taken and they were ushered into the converted auditorium, where the Toronto Symphony Orchestra played soothing mood music beneath crystal chandaliers.

"How are we supposed to find where we're sitting?" said Natalie.

"I think the people in white coats show us," said Alex. Which turned out to be the case. They were guided to a long table mid way back from the dance floor. Grace and her partner Elliot were already there, along with other familiar faces from forensics and the 27th.

"Natalie! Alex! Sit here!. I've swapped around the place cards so you're next to us," said Grace. She was swathed in deep purple silk in the style of the American Civil War. Elliot wore a suit of indigo, with a magnificent silk stock.

"That's very naughty of you," said Natalie, pulling out her chair and sitting. "Remind me to recommend a pay rise."

As everyone said hello to everyone else, Grace leaned close. "So who's this woman Nick's bringing along tonight?"

Natalie stared at her. "Nick?"

"You didn't know?" Grace pulled a face.

"Did you?"

"Me? No way," said Grace. "He told me the same as you. First I knew of it was his name on a place card."

She knew the answer already, but she asked the question anyway. Her smile was fixed to her face like a butterfly pinned to a cork board. "The woman's name wouldn't be Janette something or other, would it?"

"Yeah, that's right. You know her?"

"Not really. We've met, once or twice. She's ... an old friend of his."

Grace's look was skeptical. "Old friend, huh?"

"Who's an old friend?" said Alex.

Brightly, Natalie said, "Nick's coming. With Janette, from the Raven."

Alex laughed, incredulous. "You're kidding. He said she wouldn't be interested. I wonder why he didn't say anything."

"Wait a minute. You knew?"

"No, no," said Alex hastily. "I told him he should come. Said he ought to ask this Janette. He didn't seem too keen. Must have changed his mind."

"Must have," said Natalie. Goodness, lunch had been a long time ago. Her stomach was as hollow as a log.

Waiters and waitresses skimmed about the room, seating guests and pouring champagne. The music surged above and below the rising talk and laughter. The 27th precinct table was filling up fast. Stonetree arrived with Myra.

He wore a soft white cotton shirt, laced at the throat and tucked into baggy black pants. One eye was patched, one ear decorated with a gold ear ring. A stuffed parrot perched drunkenly on his right shoulder. She looked charming as a dairy maid, plump and pink cheeked with wispy tendrils of dark hair curling out from beneath her cap.

"Don and the Captain insisted," she said, and bent to kiss Natalie's cheek. "You look wonderful."

"Yo ho ho," said Stonetree to the table in general. "Where's the rum?"

The proceedings were to commence at eight, with a short welcoming speech from the Mayor. By seven minutes to, Nick had still not arrived. The flood of people arriving had dwindled to a trickle; most of the tables were filled.

"Maybe he changed his mind," said Alex, refilling Natalie's glass.

"Who?" she said, as though her gaze hadn't been flicking towards the entrance every other minute, as though her conversation hadn't been peripheral, distracted.

"Wow," said Grace. "As Schanke would say, how come none of *my* old friends look like that?"

Everyone turned.

Haughtiness personified, Nick and Janette glided through the room like royalty. The night club owner and the homicide cop might never have existed. Surrounded by sham and pretence, they were genuine. They wore their finery carelessly, unselfconsciously. This dress, these pearls, this cape ... they were not costumes. They were simply what one wore to an evening of dancing.

Moving without haste, they crossed the dance floor. Conversation died in their wake. One of the Julius Caesars stood blocking their path. Janette smiled at him. An unsheathed blade would smile so. The man stepped aside. Hastily.

Truth struck Natalie a hammer blow.

They were vampires.

It was in the peculiar pallor of skin untouched by the sun for eight hundred years, and longer. In the stark, unearthly quality of their beauty. In the casual, consummate authority with which they moved through the still milling mortals.

With unhurried purpose they made their way towards her: two Venus fly traps in a room full of hothouse blooms.

"Why, Natalie," said Janette. One cool, satined hand touched her shoulder briefly, in passing. "How delightful to see you again."

"Likewise," said Natalie. "Hi, Nick."

Some undefineable emotion skimmed the fine porcelain finish of his face.

"Nat."

"I see you changed your mind," she said, as the hammer blows of her heart sounded in her ears.

Janette rested a hand on his shoulder, and leaned close.

"Isn't it amusing?" she drawled. "If you knew how long it's been since Nicola and I have gone dancing. Truly, it feels like centuries."

"Careful," said Natalie. "You're showing your age."

"We'd better find our places," said Nick. "I think they're about ready to start."

He seated Janette with an absent minded courtesy she clearly took for granted. "This is an old friend of mine, Janette DuBois. Janette, my colleagues. Captain Stonetree --"

"*Enchante,*" murmured Janette.

"Miss DuBois," said Stonetree. "I'm glad you're here. Gives me a chance to thank you for your help with that counterfeiting business."

"*Ca n'est rien,*" said Janette.

Nick said, "And the Captain's partner tonight is Myra Schanke."

"Ah! Don's wife," said Janette. "I was *so* sorry to hear about Don. The shooting. Such a terrible waste of blood, don't you agree?"

"Why, yes," Myra said, uncertainly. "Thank you."

Nick's hand moved to rest on hers, and her smile became a trifle fixed. "Natalie and Alex you know. Then we have Grace and her partner, Elliot --"

Introductions were effected quickly. Then came the speeches, and congratulations from various dignitaries for the one hundred thousand dollars raised to help the poor Africans.

"Amazing, isn't it, how the amounts always round out so neatly?" Alex muttered into Natalie's ear.

"Cynic," she muttered back, but nodded, and grinned..

Next the guest conductor, Andre Previn, was introduced and applauded. Then the music began in earnest, and the parqueted dance floor filled with revolving couples.

"Shall we?" Alex said to Natalie.

"Certainly," she replied.

The others followed suit until all of the 27th precinct and forensics were waltzing, more or less successfully, to a selection of Strauss's popular compositions.

Natalie looke past Alex's shoulder to where Nick and Janette flowed between and around the press of Napoleons and Marie Antoinettes and Cleopatras and Alexanders and all the other romanticized figures from history.

A hundred years and more may have passed since last they danced together ... but watching them, you would think it had been but one night. She was very beautiful ... and he had a lovely smile.

"Hey," said Alex. "What say the doctor follows her own prescription?"

Startled, Natalie looked up at him. "Sorry? What?"

Alex sighed, and held her a little closer. "Shop *think* is just as verboten as shop *talk*," he said reprovingly.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You're right."

He grinned. "You ever watch ballroom dancing competitions on television?"

"Is this a trick question?"

"No. I was just wondering. I do, sometimes. They're good for a laugh." And suddenly his brown, ordinary face was stretched in a fixed, artificial grin. His posture stiffened. His chin tilted upwards. "Think 'Strictly Ballroom'," he advised her. "There are a thousand dead chickens sewn to your sequins, and we're out to win the tin pot trophy and beat our dreaded rivals!"

Even as she laughed, she wondered, *does he know*? And then banished the thought. This was here, and now, and his arms around her felt so safe. So secure. His hand holding hers was warm. And for two people who had never before danced together, they were doing all right.

Flushed, a little out of breath, Natalie whirled through a succession of half-forgotten steps. She danced with Stonetree, with Elliot, with several officers from other precincts. She couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed so much. Pleading dehydration, she thanked Rob Jones from the 108th and returned to the table to rest her feet and have some more wine.

Alex was guiding Myra through a daring rumba. Laughing. She tried to picture him in clerical black, his throat encircled by a neat white dog collar, and failed. Oh, he had the strength of a priest. At least, the kind of strength she imagined priests had to have. The courage of their convictions. The willingness to take into themselves all the wickedness of the world. The love for humanity in all its fallibility. For God, in His inscrutability.

What wasn't so easy was imagining him living apart from the world in the way priests did. Cut off from the fundamentals of human existence by vows designed to maintain a mystique she suspected he would never want.

Or maybe that was just the memory of his fingers on her skin.

Stonetree and Grace were getting down and dirty. It was good to see the Captain free of worry, at least for a night. Tomorrow's problems and pressures and burden of death would come soon enough. For all of them. And tonight's bright bubble of fantasy would burst, leaving no trace, as though it had never existed.

At last, reluctantly, she let her gaze turn to the centre of the dance floor, where Nick and Janette were making Torville and Dean look like stumblebums. The music had segued to a tango: sultry,

seductive. Nick had never, precisely, defined the parameters of his relationship with Janette. She'd never asked. Now she would never have to.

Jealousy is a cu-urse, jealousy is a cu-urse. The old school yard chant made her squirm. She reached for her glass and tossed the contents to the back of her throat. Let's hear it for Dutch courage. Alcohol induced aplomb. Another four or five of these and she'd be able to endure, with equanimity, the sight of Nick and Janette pressed breast to breast, thigh to thigh, black to red, bending the music to their bodies.

Get out more she'd told him, benignly bullying. Have some fun. She should be flattered he was taking her advice.

Of course, what she *really* hated watching was how Janette could move like that enfolded in all that crimson velvet. That's what *really* hurt.

The dance ended. The orchestra retired. Chow time. The dancers formed a conga line to the laden buffet tables and gossiped.

"You're not eating?" Stonetree asked Janette, returning to his chair with laden plate.

"We ate already," said Nick.

"I have an allergy," said Janette.

Despite everything, Natalie had to laugh. With the ease of much practice she turned it into a cough and concentrated on the potato salad.

Half way through the meal, Stonetree tinkled his fork against his wine glass. Conversation hushed.

He said, "I just wanted to say, Myra, how pleased we are that you're here with us tonight. It's just a shame Don couldn't be here with you. We're all real glad that the doctors have assured him of a full recovery. And we share your relief that the punk who caused all that grief is off the streets for a very long time."

There was general applause. Blushing, Myra cleared her throat. "Thank you, Captain. Everyone. Thank you for being such good friends, not just to Don, but to me as well. I don't know how I would have coped without you all." Her smile trembled. "Especially you, Nick. You saved Don's life. Your testimony put that -- that -- person behind bars. I know Don thinks the world of you. I hope you know that I do too."

Clapping, Natalie watched Nick accept Myra's tearful hug. Watched Janette, whose pretty smile didn't quite hide the mockery in her eyes.

The meal concluded. Fed and watered, the orchestra returned and the dancing resumed. Natalie looked up to find Nick at her side.

"May I?" he asked, one hand extended. His expression was a combination of diffidence and hope, one twitch away from a smile.

Looking past him, she saw Alex leading Janette onto the floor. That should prove interesting. Tilting her chin, she smiled at Nick. One of these days she was going to learn how to carry a grudge. Stay angry with him for longer than ten minutes.

She let herself say, "I thought you'd never ask," and put her hand in his.

The orchestra had gone back to the waltzes. How appropriate. Gentle, safe, entirely unexciting.

"So where did you park?" she asked, Nick's decorous hand flattened to the small of her back, her fingers prim on his shoulder.

His expression was defiant and apologetic. "I didn't."

"Oh," she said. Surprise, surprise.

Appeasingly, he said, "You look wonderful Like you've just stepped out of the Roaring Twenties."

"Well, you'd know," said Natalie. She felt his arm tighten around her waist.

"I meant to tell you," he said. "It was a spur of the moment thing, asking Janette. I never thought she'd say yes. Mortals en masse don't interest her."

"Except as a smorgasbord," she added, before she could stop herself.

"Nat..."

"Sorry."

A lull in difficult conversation. Natalie closed her eyes. Waltzing with Nick wasn't quite assedate as she'd anticipated. In fact it was like being caught in the eye of a hurricane: immeasurable power whirling around and around and herself at its centre, maintaining a precarious balance.

She turned her head and watched Alex listen to something Janette was saying. She was flirting with him. Batting her eyelashes. Her shoulders rose slender and white above the rich velvet of her bodice. The hand on his shoulder shifted, just a little, until one finger brushed the side of his throat. She smiled.

"Don't worry," said Nick. "He's perfectly safe."

"Of course he is," said Natalie. "You wouldn't have brought her, surely, if it wasn't safe."

His expression as he watched Janette was hard to fathom. Indulgence, affection, a gentle exasperation, an echo of nostalgia. His lips curved in a small, wistful smile. "Ah, Nat. If you'd been there, at the balls we attended. The clothes, and the jewels, and the crowned heads of Europe. Do you know, I once danced with La Pompadour?"

At any other time, in any other place, she would have been fascinated. "Really?"

He shook his head, still watching Janette as, lighter than thistledown, she floated within the circle of Alex's arms. "It wasn't always bad," he said softly. "Sometimes, it was ... wonderful."

Her lips tightened. Yes, and wasn't that the problem in a nutshell?

He looked down at her, then, and frowned. "Don't be angry. I didn't mean to spoil anything. I --"

Natalie smiled, brightly. "How could you possibly spoil anything? Alex asked me to come with him, and I accepted. You don't need my permission to take a friend dancing."

"I know," said Nick, "but --"

"But me no buts," Natalie told him. "We're here. We're dancing. Isn't that enough?"

They continued their stately revolutions about the dance floor. Natalie closed her eyes and let the music move her. Nick said, "You really like Alex, don't you?"

"Yes," she replied. And looking at him, added, "What? Are you feeling protective again?"

His smile was swift, with an edge of concern. "If I am ... do you mind?"

She sighed. "Do I get a choice? You'll feel protective regardless. But Nick ... it's a two way street. I know you and Janette have a shared history. I'm not suggesting you forget that. But if you really are serious about coming back across, you have to stay focused."

Quizzical, he stared down at her. "You think I'm not serious?"

She didn't look away. "I think you're easily distracted."

And after that, there didn't seem much else to say. The waltz finished and Alex claimed her for the next dance. She went to him willingly, and let his silly chatter charm her. Felt the slick glide of muscle beneath her hands. Returned smile for smile, laugh for laugh, and did not look again at Nick, or Janette.

The music finished and the orchestra took a short break. Everyone sat back down at the table, and sipped wine.

Janette, surveying the laughing mortality about her, suddenly sat upright as though someone had stuck her with a pin that she could feel.

"Janette?" said Nick, beside her.

She glanced at him briefly, not meeting his eyes. "Excuse me, won't you? I must go and - - powder my nose."

She was gone almost ten minutes. Natalie stopped laughing as Janette returned to the table. There was a look in her eyes with which she was only too familiar.

Janette was in shock.

Nick stood. "Janette?"

Her smile was brittle. "I'm afraid I don't feel very well. Nicola, I am so sorry ... could you take me home?"

"Of course," he said immediately. Stepped close to her and touched his fingers to her face. Her own hand came to cover them. He spoke rapidly in French, and she responded in the same language. Natalie couldn't follow what they were saying: she suspected it was a form of French that hadn't been spoken for at least three centuries. Whatever Janette was saying didn't seem to convince Nick. His tone became more insistent. Hers sharpened, and her eyes narrowed. He backed down.

"That's a shame," said Alex, as he watched them leave. "Nick was really enjoying himself. Hope she's all right. She was as white as a sheet. Looked like she'd seen a ghost."

"She'll be fine," said Natalie. "Janette may look delicate, but she's as tough as old boots. Come on, the orchestra's back. Let's dance."

CHAPTER TEN

Twenty minutes later there was a blackout.

"Oh damn," said Natalie. "And I was having such a good time."

It took nearly half an hour to get everybody outside. Entertainment Centre staff members armed with torches guided the laughing, protesting, complaining, resigned throng into the foyer and onto the street outside. The orchestra played cheerful music from memory until the last bobbing torch light faded into the darkness outside.

Alex put his arm around Natalie and held her firmly against him. Why couldn't people just *wait* ? Pushing and shoving and barging in the pitch black wasn't going to achieve a damned thing except trouble.

Eventually, they made it outside. It was a clear night without much illumination: just enough to pick out the edges of the surrounding buildings.

"I can see lights over there," said Natalie, pointing. "Maybe it's just this grid that's gone down." She looked back at the darkened Entertainment Centre. "You'd think they'd have installed emergency generators, wouldn't you?"

"It's called saving the taxpayer's money," said Alex.

"I've completely lost Grace and Stonetree and the others," said Natalie, staring around her.

"They'll be all right. And there's no point trying to find them."

"No, I guess not," Natalie agreed. "What a fiasco. I shudder to think what's happening down in the car park. You must be psychic."

He grinned. "Not really. I just prefer walking to waiting." Faintly, there came the sound of squealing tyres. A fusillade of horn blasts.

"Oops," said Natalie. "Maybe we'd should clear out now, before we're needed down there in a professional capacity."

"Good thinking, 99."

There was no danger of getting trampled out here, but Alex kept his arm where it was anyway. Natalie didn't seem to mind. Side by side they headed to where he'd parked the car, bumping a little as they tried to co-ordinate the different lengths of their strides. Natalie giggled. Slipped her arm around his waist.

He'd gone a little crazy after fleeing the seminary. Leaping from that chaste, earnest environment into the sex soaked world of night clubs and piano bars like a starving man brought to bounty, he'd buried himself and his pain in female flesh. Regained his senses eventually to discover that he wanted more than physical satiety, and had no idea how to go about getting it.

The ensuing years had taught him a little more about women as people, as opposed to forbidden fruit, but love, the holy grail of the secular community, had continued to elude him.

Until now.

Natalie said, "That was so much fun." She sounded wistful.

He gave her a little shake. "Hey. No shop tonight. No worrying about the task force. Remember?"

"I know, I know. Sorry."

"Why do I get the feeling that you and fun are only nodding acquaintances?"

"It's not that bad," she protested. "But you know what this job's like. It swallows you body and soul. It's hard and it's messy and often as not it breaks your heart."

"And you love it."

"I love it."

"All the time?"

"No, not all the time." Then she added, sounding more like her teasing self, "But it does have fringe benefits, you know."

"Such as?"

"Meeting you."

He stopped. She bumped to a halt beside him, off balance. Her hand came up against his chest to steady herself. Looking down he could just make out the soft edge of her profile. The gleam of her eyes as she waited for him to speak. He bent his head and kissed her.

Her lips beneath his were tentative at first. The hand on his chest pushed once, then relaxed. She made a small sound in her throat. Her body was suddenly pliant in his arms. Surrendering. Demanding.

In the end he was the one to pull away. "Oh God," he said. His breathing was raw. Ragged.

So was hers.

They reached the car eventually. He sat her on the hood and kissed her mouth, her temples, her throat. Felt her fingers in his hair, on his nape, touch his back. There was a wildness in her eyes as he pulled back to look at her. She laced her fingers behind his head and pulled him to her. He was groaning, aching. He felt her giggle against him. If he didn't get her inside the car, now, he was going to commit a felony.

"Where are we going?" said Natalie. "That was the turn off to my place."

"The night is still young, Dr Lambert," Alex said, and grinned.

"This is The Nook," said Natalie, as he pulled the car against the kerb.

"My, what a noticing kind of person you are," said Alex, admiringly. "Ever thought of a career in law enforcement?"

"I didn't know you had a key," said Natalie, watching him unlock the front door.

"Freddie lets me come and practice whenever I can find time," Alex said. He pushed the door wide and stood back. "After you."

"Why isn't the club open tonight?"

Alex flicked on the light switch, turned off the alarm and shut the door. "Freddie's in Vancouver for a week. His mother's in hospital. If he can't be here, the club doesn't open."

"He must be doing all right, if he can afford to take off like that without leaving someone in charge."

He laughed. "Freddie's independently wealthy. He's a lord or an earl or something. This is just a hobby."

"You're kidding!"

"No," said Alex, and took her hand in his. Side by side they stood at the top of the stairs that led down to the club proper. Looked at each other and grinned.

"The new Shirley Temple, huh?" said Alex.

"What did you have in mind, Fred?"

Hand in hand they did a Bojangles Robinson Shirley Temple routine down the stairs. Down four, back two, down six, back four. Puffing, laughing.

"Oh," groaned Natalie when they finally reached the bottom. "I won't be able to walk tomorrow, I know it."

They threaded their way between the tables, whose chairs sat on top like uprooted trees, stacked for easy floor cleaning. The air was faintly stale, the memory of cigarette smoke teasing on the back of the tongue. Alex hit the stage lights and sat at the nearest piano.

"Play it, Sam," said Natalie, leaning against the other one.

He played her his favourite Brahms waltz.

She sat on the other piano stool. Rested her head against her hand. "Play me something else."

He played her second movement of Beethoven's sonata No. 8 in C minor, opus 13. The Pathetique. *Adagio cantabile.*

Her face was luminous, her whole self entirely caught up in the act of listening. His heart twisted with love for her.

"Play me more," she said softly.

He played her Schumann's Traumerai. The Swan, by Saint-Saens. Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring. God, he loved Bach. He played her Dvorak's Humoresque in G Flat, and made her laugh. Then he played her Chopin's Raindrop, the prelude in D Flat, and made her cry.

When the last, lingering notes had faded into silence, he went to her. Knelt before her, and ran his hands up her bare arms. He plucked the feathered headband from her hair, and tumbled the apple scented springiness of it about her shoulders. He kissed her closed eyes, the corners of her mouth. He

travelled his lips the length of her throat, and the breadth of her collar bones. He rested his hands lightly on her breasts, and felt them leap to meet him.

His own skin burned at her touch. Her fingers counted his ribs, her palms rose and fell to the rapid, erratic lifting of his chest. The beads on her dress rattled in the rhythm of their mutual desire.

He groaned into her open mouth as he conquered the fastenings at the back of her dress. Smoothed the rose pink material, and what lay beneath it, from her skin, so that it lay abandoned, crumpled, in her lap. Crushed it between them, as he drew her closer. He was trembling as his tongue touched the perfumed hollow at the base of her throat. His teeth nipped a downward path along her smooth flesh. She tasted sweet, so sweet, and his head swam with desire for her.

"No," she whispered, and pulled away.

Shocked, he looked at her. He couldn't conceive that his arms were empty.

"I -- I can't -- do it," she said. Her voice was full of sorrow and disappointment and frustration. She began to cry, silently. Shakingly. Tears rising and spilling, slicking her cheeks.

Aghast, poleaxed, he reached for her, but she twisted aside. Fell against the piano in a jangle of sharps and flats and hid her face. Every line of her body denied him.

He groped for support. Levered himself to his feet and stared down at her. "Natalie, for God's sake, what's wrong?" He could have wept himself. "I'm sorry, I thought -- you seemed to God, I never meant to --"

Still she would not look at him. "I'm sorry. It isn't you, Alex. It's me." Her voice was scalded with pain. "It's my fault."

"But why?" he demanded, bewildered. "Natalie, for thelove of God, tell me what's the matter, please. You're breaking my heart!"

"I'm sorry," she said again. She was trembling.

"Natalie ... " He reached out and touched her shoulder. Snatched his hand back as she flinched. Said helplessly, "Natalie, I love you."

"Don't," she said. "Because I can't love you. I thought I could. I wanted to, but ..."

"But what?" he whispered. "Is it something I've siad? Something I've done? Whatever it is, I'll fix it, Natalie! Please, just tell me!"

"No ... no ... " she said. Then she turned and looked at him. Her flawless skin was streaked with blue black mascara. "It isn't you," she said again. Despair was in her face and in her voice.

He knew, then. Rage, blind and obliterating, robbed him of sight.

Nick.

When he could at last speak, he said again, "Natalie, I love you. *I* love you. Here. Now. At this moment. Not in some misty, vague time in the future. Now."

She had stopped crying. "You don't understand."

"You're damned right I don't understand! What are you going to do, grow old waiting for him to make up his mind?"

Her voice was low and unsteady. "Shut up, Alex."

It was unforgiveable, the brute desire to pay back pain with pain. He should just go, now. Leave her the car. Get home alone, somehow, and deal with this like a man. He said, "God, Natalie, you were there tonight. You saw how it was with him and Janette. I'd say he'd already decided, wouldn't you?"

"Shut up, Alex."

"No, I won't shut up!" He took her by the shoulders. Made her look at him. She clutched the undone dress to herself, teeth sunk deeply into her bottom lip. "How many times do I have to say it, Natalie? How loudly? I love you. I love you. I love you."

"I'm sorry," she whispered, and closed her eyes

He flung himself away from her. Leapt from the edge of the stage. Snatched a chair from the nearest table and threw it with extraordinary violence across the room. It hit the far wall. Smashed apart. Clattered to the floor in pieces.

A hand touched him. He whirled, drunk with pain. She'd managed to do up the dress. "Don't," she said. "Alex, don't. Now you're breaking my heart."

"Good," he said, but he didn't mean it. Exhausted, he slumped onto the edge of the stage. She sat beside him.

"I never meant for this to happen," she said. "I never wanted to hurt you. I do love you, Alex. But - - "

"You loved Nick first," he said.

She nodded. "I can't explain it."

"You don't have to," he said heavily. "You don't owe me a thing."

"I do," she said. "I owe you laughter, and music, and friendship. I owe you the sense of myself as a desirable woman."

"Natalie! Of course you're desirable!"

Her smile was gentle. "When I'm with you, I believe it."

If Nick had been there, he would have battered him senseless. He called Natalie his friend? Friends, real friends, didn't hurt each other like this. He said, "Believe it always, Natalie. No matter who's with you. Or who isn't."

The smile faded. "There are reasons, Alex. Reasons that I can't share with you. But believe me, they're good ones."

He couldn't believe her. No excuse could excuse what Nick was doing to her. What was it about Natalie that held him back from her? That drove him into Janette's arms instead? Her arms, and her bed: he may not be the most worldly man around, but he knew sexual heat when he saw it. Those two had reeked of it.

She took his hand, and kissed it. "Can you forgive me?"

He shook his head. "Nat, there's nothing to forgive. It's your decision. I don't have to like it. I can't pretend to understand it. But I respect it. I respect you. I think you're the most honest woman I've ever met."

She heaved a tremulous sigh. "Thank you."

Staring at the floor he said, "I just wish I could say the same about Nick. I really liked him. I thought ... well, I thought a lot of things."

She was still holding his hand. Her fingers tightened painfully about him. She said, urgently, "Please don't hate Nick for this, Alex. Your friendship means more to him than you could ever know. Than he'll ever tell you. Don't let me get in the way of that."

Alex stared. "Do you know what you're asking? He's hurting you, and --"

She shook him. "No. Alex, no. I'm hurting myself. I know that. But it's my choice. Blame me for it, not him.'

Blame her? How could he? Of course it was Nick's fault.

"Alex? Please? If you love me, please don't blame him."

He frowned. "That's blackmail, Natalie."

"I know." She found a smile. "See? I'm not as perfect as you thought I was."

"Yes, you are," he said, and pulled her into his arms. Rested his cheek on her hair, and inhaled the scent of her. "Okay. Okay. I'll try." He smoothed a tendril of hair back from her face. Held up his hand so that the palm faced her. "Can we be friends, at least, do you think?"

Her expression was grave. "I don't know. Can we?"

"I swear I won't push it," he said. "I'll never ask for more than you can give." But I can wait. I can wait.

She smiled. Sniffed. "Friends, then," she said, and pressed her palm to his. Entwined her fingers with his.

Friends. It wasn't enough. It would never be enough.

I can wait.

Nick watched Janette as she drifted about the dance floor, drink in one hand. He had a glass of his own, which he sipped from now as his eyes followed her gently random movements. *Don't worry,* Nicola, she'd said, mocking him. *It's cow.* And had made a great production of pouring it at arm's length, her face screwed up in comical disgust.

They were alone. A black out had shut down the club earlier, sent mortals and vampires alike out to find their fun somewhere else. The power had returned ten minutes after the taxi deposited them on the

pavement outside, but Janette had posted the 'closed' sign and sent the remaining stragglers out to play until dawn.

Whatever it was that had upset her at the ball, she seemed to be over it now. *All those mortals,* she'd said as they waited for the taxi to arrive. *You know I don't mix with them as much as I used to. It was either leave, or embarrass you in front of your friends.*

He wasn't sure he believed her. He had no choice but to accept her story. It was the only one he was likely to get.

She said now, "I shall be sorry to leave here."

"Leave? What are you talking about?"

"The landlord is refusing to renew the lease. He wants to convert the building into apartments. So I must look for somewhere else." She clashed three chains together thoughtfully. "I have a couple of places in mind. It's too bad, really. I'd grown quite fond of this place."

His eyebrows rose. "You?" he said. "What happened to 'these lives aren't real, these lives aren't meant to last, these lives are clothes that we must eventually wear out'? Hmmm? What happened to that, Janette?"

She glowered at him. "They aren't real, they do not last and we do wear them out, Nicola. Whether you care to admit it or not, it is the truth. But *I* decide when the life I am living must die. *I* decide, and nobody else."

He drained the glass and thumped it aside. "That's all I want. So why do you give me such a hard time?"

"No, Nicola. There is a difference," she said soberly, and looked at him steadily, without smiling.

"I don't want to die," he protested. "I want to be mortal."

She shrugged. "It is the same thing, *n'est-ce pas* ?" And then she laughed. "You will never guess who I had a letter from the other day."

After nearly eight centuries, he should be used to her dramatic *volte faces.* "I have no idea," he said. "As you once pointed out to me, you know so many people.'

"Guess," she said.

He sighed. "Vladimir?"

"No."

"Etienne?"

"No."

"Max?"

"No."

He thought. "David? Gustav? Raoul?"

"No, no, no."

"I give up."

She frowned. "So easily?".

He laughed. "Janette, we'd be here till the middle of next week if I kept on naming all of your ... friends."

"All right," she said, relenting. "It was from Miklos."

He stared. "Miklos? *Miklos* Miklos?"

"What other Miklos is there?"

Bemused, he stared into the distance. "Miklos. I haven't seen him since Rothenburg. It must be, what, two hundred years?"

"A hundred and ninety four," she corrected him. "Not that I'm counting, of course."

"Of course."

Laughing, she came to sit beside him on the couch. "Do you remember? You decided he was trifling with my affections --"

"He was," said Nick, darkly.

"No more than I was trifling with his. You challenged him to a duel, and the pair of you proceeded to hack each other to pieces with your swords. And LaCroix --" She stopped, abruptly.

He said, "LaCroix found us bleeding away in our respective corners, and was furious with me because I'd allowed Miklos to cut me so many times." He had to smile. "He said it was an insult to his teaching."

"Anyway," said Janette. "Miklos is coming here. To Toronto. I sent him the air fare." And added, as Nick looked at her, "You know Miklos. He never could hold on to money. I thought I'd give him a job here. Or wherever I move to. So you must promise to be nice to him."

Nick said dryly, "Is that necessary? I'm sure you'll be nice to him enough for both of us."

Her eyes widened. "Why, Nicola. Don't tell me that you are jealous? Still?" She was clearly pleased by the prospect.

He grasped her forearm and tugged her towards him. "And if I said yes?"

"Nicola, my dress," she protested, but made no attempt to free herself. Lay atop him instead, and tossed her glass aside. It shattered on the floor behind them.

"And if I said yes," he repeated, punctuating each word with a swift kiss.

"Any other answer would be unacceptable," she retorted, and closed her mouth on his.

He felt the change roar through him like a brush fire, and for once was not dismayed. She tasted of blood, and wine, and a thousand shared nights of excess. He rolled her beneath him. His fingers plunged into the intricate restraints of her hair, scattering pearls with a savage disregard for their value. His tongue sought hers, fought hers. He could feel her laughter in his mouth. Her hands were hard upon him, driving, urging. His teeth found her throat. Pricked the tender skin. Golden eyed, exultant, he reared back, preparing to strike.

Her hands held him back. "No," she said, and threw him aside. Lifted from the couch and touched lightly to the dance floor three feet distant. Her eyes had returned to normal. She watched him, warily.

He picked himself up off the floor and stared at her. "What is the *matter* with you?"

She shrugged. "I have a headache."

"Vampires don't get headaches!"

"Are you calling me a liar?"

"I'm calling you a --" He stopped himself. Swallowed the frustration. Sat down.

She sat beside him. "Forgive me, *mon cher*, but it would be a mistake."

"Why?" he said bitterly. "Are you afraid I'll taste too much of cow?"

"No. Of course not."

"What, then?"

She smoothed her hair with her elegant white fingers. "You didn't tell your little mortal friend you were coming tonight, did you? Or that you were bringing me?"

"I was going to," he said. "I just never got around to it. Why? What do you care?"

"Nothing at all," said Janette. "But she does."

"Natalie? That's ridiculous. She hardly looked at me all night. She only had eyes for Alex. She's fallen head over heels for him. Which is fine. It's wonderful. I'm thrilled for her. I think it's fantastic. She's a wonderful person and she deserves all the love in the world."

There was silence. He met Janette's skeptical gaze defiantly. "All the mortal love?" she asked. "Why? When she could have so much more?"

Motionless, he said, "No. Never. And I swear, Janette, if you ever, I mean *ever*- - "

"Nicola!" She sounded genuinely shocked. "Me? Take Natalie? Are you out of your mind? The woman has formaldehyde in her veins!" When he did not smile, at least, she said, "Nicola. Do you think me capable of hurting you like that? Do you?"

"You hurt me just now," he muttered.

"I stopped you from making a mistake," she said firmly. "You would enjoy yourself tonight, and hate yourself tomorrow. For being weak. For surrendering to your desires. For betraying your precious Natalie. And then you would blame me. Again."

"I never --" he began, then stopped as her hand came up.

"Please," she said. "If there cannot be nakedness between us, let there at least be truth."

He did not reply. She crossed to the bar and filled two more glasses, both from the special bottle she kept for him. Closed the distance between them, and handed him one of the glasses. Lifted hers to her lips and drained it in one swallow. Only a narrowing of her eyes betrayed her distaste.

"You see?" she said quietly.

He placed his glass, untouched, on the floor.

"No," he said. "I don't."

The door slammed closed behind him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The 89th was, as usual, a zoo. It was even more of a zoo than home, which was saying something. Nick decided never to request a transfer to the 89th.

"You're quiet again tonight," he said to Alex, looking up from reading the latest task force bulletin. "Is somethng wrong?"

Alex flicked him a glance. "No."

Puzzled, Nick considered him while pretending to read. For three days, ever since the ball, he'd sensed in Alex -- something Hostility? Resentment? Surprised a look on his face, sometimes, that came close to outright dislike. He had no idea what he could have done to put Alex in a temper with him.

Come to think of it, though, he'd been snappish with just about everybody. Strange. You'd think he'd be floating. Weren't you supposed to float, when you were in love? And it had been pretty clear, at the ball, that Alex was in love with Natalie. And vice versa.

Maybe they'd had a fight. But then, he and Alex had had to stop by the lab only last night, and things looked fine between them. Okay, they didn't throw themselves into each other's arms ... but Natalie wasn't the type to go in for excessive displays of public affection, so it was hard to tell.

And even if they had had a fight ... how could it possibly be his fault?

"Look," he said, abandoning his pretence of reading. "Are you sure you're all right? Have I said or done something to offend you? Because if I have, I wish you'd just come out and tell me, so I can apologise and we can drop the silent treatment."

Alex sighed. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I don't know," Nick said, exasperated. "But ever since Saturday night I've felt like I'm working with an unexploded bomb. I'd like to defuse the problem so we can get on with this investigation."

"Ha!" said Alex. "What investigation? You've read the update. We're no further along now than we were when we started. We've got casts of tyre tracks that can't be traced, casts of footprints for people we can't find, we've got absolutely no eye witnesses, no likely suspects out of all the perverts and deviants we've had to rub shoulders with --"

"We've got twelve uncorroborated alibis," Nick reminded him.

"Come on, Nick," Alex retorted. "Even I know that it's a quantum leap from an uncorroborated alibi to an arrest warrant."

"Yeah," said Nick. He smiled. "But it could be worse. At least there haven't been any more kidnappings."

Alex scowled. "Thank you, Pollyanna." He reached for another folder and knocked his mug over. A stream of coffee washed across the desk. "Oh *shit!*" he said, and leapt to his feet. "Dammit, dammit, dammit!" He shot a furious look at Nick. "Well don't just sit there, for God's sake, help me clean it up! Or do you *want* to re-interview half the human slug population of Toronto?"

They mopped up the mess. Alex tossed his sodden paper towling into the bin and slumped back into his seat. He looked worn out.

"Cases hit slow patches, Alex," Nick said, reorganising his own files. "It's the nature of the beast. You have to pace yourself."

Alex glared. "If I want a pep talk I'll buy myself some fortune cookies."

Nick drummed his fingers on the table. Counted to three under his breath. "Have you been spending time with the Butlers again?"

"No, I haven't," said Alex.

"Who, then?"

"Tammy McCartney's family," said Alex. And added, as Nick went to speak, "I cleared it with Dixon and Sing first. Okay?"

"Okay," Nick said carefully. "So all of this is just because you're frustrated with the lack of progress we're making, right?"

"All of what?"

Nick gestured at the stained paperwork spread out to dry. "This. The short temper. The silent treatment."

Alex looked at him. There it was again. That undercurrent of ... dislike. It just didn't make any sense. "I don't know what you're talking about."

The blank stare defeated him. He said, "We'd better hit the road. See if we can break some of those uncorroborated alibis. You need anything?"

"No," said Alex.

They told Prescott where they were going, and left the station house.

"I want to swing by The Raven first," said Nick, easing the Caddy into the traffic. "Janette knows a lot of people who know a lot of people. I've asked her to keep her ear to the ground. Maybe she's heard something by now."

"Fine," said Alex.

Nick looked at him sideways, and sighed.

This was going to be another long shift.

The Raven was packed. Looking around, Nick saw that most of the clientele were human: Janette's fledglings must have gone out to play again. Good. In the dim lighting it was unlikely that Alex would notice anything ... but not being able to keep him out of the place made him nervous.

He looked for Janette. They hadn't spoken since Saturday night. Which was nothing: they'd gone decades between disagreements in the past. He'd have preferred not to be here now. Her inexplicable rejection still rankled. Only the pressures of the investigation had lured him back.

She was at the far left hand end of the bar, pouring herself a glass of something dark and red. Not cow, this time. The bar tender was in the middle, polishing the bar top. A single figure sat at the other end, his back to the dance floor. He had spiky pale brown hair, almost blonde, and was dressed in black leather. As they approached he straightened. Lifted his head and turned around on the bar stool to face them.

Alex checked. A smile, the first in three days, lit his face. "Hey. Now there's a coincidence. That's Eddie. Eddie Cross, the music guy. I told you about him, remember?"

Nick slowed. Stopped. Forgot to breathe.

LaCroix.

Janette was watching him, glass balanced lightly against her blood red lips. Her face was expressionless.

The room kaleidoscoped about him. Settled into a new configuration that suddenly made sense. Her abrupt departure from the ball. Her refusal to let him drink of her. Her assiduous turning of the conversation that had so neatly distracted his attention from her uncharacteristic self denial.

Ah, but she was good. She was very, very good.

Seven hundred and sixty six years ago he had gone to her, distraught, and said, *"How could you? I thought you loved me. Yet you lured me to this man, this vampire ... and look what has become of me."*"

She had kissed him. *"Cher Nicola, please understand. Before you, there was always LaCroix."*

Seven hundred and sixty six years.

Nothing had changed.

Please. If there cannot be nakedness between us, let there at least be truth.

There would never be either again.

Alex was laughing. Beckoning. "Nick! Come on! I'll introduce you."

Walking was nothing but a matter of placing one foot in front of the other. He did so.

"Nick," said Alex. "This is Eddie Cross, the guy I told you about. Eddie, my partner Nick Knight."

LaCroix said pleasantly. "How nice to meet you." He held out his hand.

Nick looked at it. Held out his own. Watched as LaCroix clasped it, then brought his other hand up to capture it completely. The musician's fingers tightened gently on his bones.

"And you're a policeman too, Nick? A homicide detective, like Alex?"

Nick nodded.

"What an ... interesting ... life you must lead," said LaCroix. "Murder is such a heinous crime. Don't you think so?"

"Yes," said Nick. LaCroix had not released his hand. He waited.

LaCroix opened his fingers and took his hands away. "Especially, I've always thought, when it occurs within a family. When brother raises his hand to brother, or a son strikes down his father. What crueller a betrayal could there be? Hmm?"

"None," said Nick.

The mobile eyebrows lifted. "You agree with me? I'm flattered."

Alex said, "Sorry I didn't get back to you the other night, but this investigation is a killer."

La Croix said, "Not at all, Alex. I understand perfectly." He smiled. "Nick, I must tell you. I was most entertained by your little performance with Alex the other week. The Chopsticks duet? You appeared to be having such a good time. You and he must be very good friends."

"He's my temporary partner," said Nick. "That's all."

Alex stared. "Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Surely a little closer than that?" Lacroix objected. He turned to Alex. "I know. Since you're here, what do you say to a drink? Hmm? I'm feeling very thirsty."

"No," said Nick, and took half a step forward. A raised eyebrow halted him.

"*No* ?" said LaCroix.

"We're on duty. We have to go. It was -- nice -- to meet you."

LaCroix's smile widened. "Oh, but I"m sure we'll meet again. Soon."

"Nick --" Alex said, pale with anger.

"Come on," said Nick. "We're going. Now." He took Alex's arm.

Alex wrenched himself free. Nodded to LaCroix. "Another time, Eddie. I'll -- I'll call you."

"Please do. We still have so much to discuss."

Janette had disappeared. Which was wise of her. Nick hustled Alex out of the Raven and into the Caddy. Put his foot down, and screeched away from the Raven in a cloud of burnt rubber.

Alex said, in the quiet voice of extreme anger, "You had better have a damned good explanation for what you just did."

"I don't trust him," said Nick, eyes fixed on his hands, which threatened to crush the steering wheel. With a conscious effort, he relaxed them. Turned his attention to the road. He felt sick.

"You don't trust him," Alex repeated slowly. "You meet the guy for all of three minutes, instantly you can tell he's not to be trusted, and you hustle me out of there like I'm a criminal. Where the hell do you get off?"

"Right here," said Nick, and cut across three lanes of traffic and through a blare of horns, into a lay by. "Sorry, Alex. Leave the Caddy at the 89th. I'll see you tomorrow night."

And he was gone. Just like that. Alex sat. Enraged. Confused.

So this was what Don Schanke had meant.

Shit. *Shit.*

"*Nick!* I know you're up there, so just let me the hell in!"

Nick lifted his head from the table and stared at the security camera monitor. Alex. What time was it? The loft was filling with sunlight, floor, walls and furniture barred black and gold. Awake now, his senses screamed. Lurching to his feet he went in search of the remote. He was having trouble seeing anything. The room swam redly in and out of focus. Tripping over the corner of the lounge he fell into a patch of sunlight.

"*Nick* ! Would you let me in?"

Nick writhed on the floor, bathed in gentle, lethal light. He heard the elevator gears operating. Someone was coming up. Disoriented, agonised, he scrabbled sideways into the blessed relief of shadow. There came a thud thunk as the elevator stopped. The loft door rolled open.

"Nick? Where are you? Nick -- oh my God. Alex, find the remote. Close the shutters."

Safe behind the leather lounge he hid his face in his hands and willed them to go away.

Natalie knelt beside him. She was wearing 'Provocateur' again. "Let me see," she said.

"I'm all right."

"Who's the one with the medical degree here? Let me see."

He lowered his hands and she leaned close, inspecting the damage. "What's going on, Nick?" she demanded, her fingers gentle on his face.

"Nothing."

"Nothing? You bail out on Alex, disappear into the night and you expect me to --" She stopped. Inhaled. Wrinkled her nose. Said very quietly, "How much have you had to drink?"

"Not nearly enough," he said, and pulled himself to his feet.

Alex finished closing the last shutter and turned. "Where the hell have you been? Prescott's ready to lynch you. Stonetree's breaking furniture with his bare hands. They've left twenty messages on your answering machine. And what was that stunt you pulled after The Raven? How do you I think felt, having to go back to the 89th to tell Prescott that I'd lost my partner? And as for Eddie -- he called me. He thought it was funny, thank God."

It was funny. It was hilarious. On a cosmic scale. Another of God's exquisite practical jokes.

"Sit down," said Natalie, her voice clipped and cold.

"I don't need your help," said Nick, as she tried to take his arm. Pulling away he overbalanced, falling against the back of the settee.

"My God," said Alex. His voice quivered with disgust. "You're drunk." He looked around him for the first time. "*God.* How much have you had, Nick? There must be --" He stopped, counting. Stared disbelievingly at Natalie, then back at Nick. "Five bottles? You drank five bottles of wine? Are you insane?"

"Yes," said Natalie, in a voice of quiet despair. "He is."

And leaving him she collected all the empty bottles and put them in the garbage. Opened the fridge. It was empty. She couldn't bring herself to look at him.

"So come on," said Alex, as Nick staggered to the table and sat down. Covered his seared face with his seared hands. "Care to enlighten me? What was it, exactly, that you didn't trust about Eddie? Was it the way he dressed? The colour of his hair? What? He was just trying to be friendly, and you acted like he was a master criminal, or something. I don't know. But I'm not leaving until I get an explanation. For that, and why you jumped head first into an ocean of wine last night instead of staying on the job."

Nick said, "An explanation? I have none. But I warn you, Alex, stay away from ... Eddie Cross."

Alex laughed incredulously. "What?"

Natalie watched Nick lower his hands. Already the burns were fading. He'd drunk so much, his regenerative powers were almost immediate. Sickened, frightened, she tried, and failed, to imagine what could have precipitated this unparalleled disaster.

"It's an instinct, Alex. A gut feeling. Stay away from him. He's trouble."

Alex walked to the piano and back, his movements chaotic with anger. "You -- are -- unbelievable," he managed to say. "The most amazing piece of work I have ever met in my life. No, Nick, I am not going to stay away from Eddie Cross. Not because you tell me to. I like Eddie. He's a nice, uncomplicated guy who likes music. And who's in a position to do me a couple of favours because he likes the way I play a piano. I don't know where you get this shit from, but I'm not staying around to hear any more of it. I have to get back to work. I brought the Caddy back. It's downstairs." He tossed the keys onto the table. "Turn up tonight if you haven't got anything better to do. Natalie?"

"I -- I'm staying."

"Of course you are."

"Alex --"

Hiding his face in his hands again, Nick listened to her go to Alex. Kiss him. Say, "You can see for yourself the state he's in. I can't leave him. Dinner, tonight? My place. I'll cook."

Alex said, "Are you sure you'll be all right? I mean, he's not a dangerous drunk, is he?"

"No."

"All right. Tonight."

"Wait. How will you get back to the precinct?"

"I'll call a cab. Be careful."

Another kiss. The sound of the door, the elevator. Silence. Then the click click of her heels on the floor as she approached. The scrape of chair legs against wood. The thump of her elbows on the table.

"You're not drunk," she said flatly. "So what the hell is going on?"

"Go away, Nat."

"No."

"I want to be alone."

"And I want some answers."

"No," he said. "You don't."

Then her hands were on his wrists, baring his face to her. "Tell me. Whatever it is, we can deal with it."

He pulled free. Sat back in the chair and said, "Deal with it." He laughed. "*Deal* with it? Tell me, doctor. How do you suggest we deal with the devil?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," said Natalie.

"That's right. You don't."

She took a deep breath. Let it out. "All right. Answer this, then. Who is Eddie Cross, and why do want Alex to stay away from him?"

His hands were shaking. He closed them tight, one about the other, and rested them on the table top.

"LaCroix."

"LaCroix?" she repeated angrily. "What's he got to do with it? He's dead."

"He's alive. And he's calling himself Eddie Cross."

He watched the words sink slowly through the flesh of her face. Shrink her. Shrivel her. Rattle her bones and deaden her eyes.

"But ... you killed him." Her voice was dry as dust.

He flung his arms wide in an extravagant arc. "They killed Christ and he came back. Why not LaCroix?"

"It isn't possible," she said. "It *can't* be possible."

He smiled. "Would you like me to introduce you?"

She stood, and pushed away from the table. "Oh my God. Oh my *God*." Then she turned. Her face was vicious. "You met him in the Raven? That means Janette knew. She knew, and she didn't tell you! That *bitch*!"

Nick shook his head. "He would have forbidden it."

"She's supposed to care about you, Nick! She should've --"

He shook his head. "No, Nat. You don't understand. It isn't wise to disobey LaCroix."

Natalie smacked the table top. "Or try and kill him. Nick, you have to get out of town. Now. I'll take emergency leave, you can travel in the Caddy's trunk till sunset. I'll take you anywhere you want to go. We can leave Canada. Book a ship to anywhere in the world. I'll arrange everything. I'll --"

She'd moved beside him. He reached out and took her hand. "Dear Nat. There'd be no point. He'll find me, no matter where I go. He always does. Besides. I'm tired of running. It's time this matter was settled between us, one way or another."

She pulled her hand free. "But Nick, you can't just ... just sit here and wait for him to come for you."

He made himself meet her eyes. "It won't be me he comes for. Not at first."

Sick understanding flooded her. "Alex? He's going to get to you through -- Nick, you have to warn him. Tell him --"

"What, Nat? What do I tell him? That nice, uncomplicated Eddie Cross is a vampire who will hurt him to punish me?"

Her eyes were stark. "Make something up. Tell Alex he's got a criminal record, that he's a Mafia leg breaker. Tell him something, *anything*."

"He won't listen to me, Nat. Any credibility I had with Alex is gone. He thinks I'm a lying drunk now. And I suppose, in a sense, he's right."

"Please! Spare me the self pity!" she spat. Then took a moment to rein in her temper. "All right," she continued more quietly."Then go to LaCroix. Work it out with him. Keep Alex out of it all together."

He shoved his chair away from the table. "You think I haven't thought of that? What do think I was doing last night?"

"It's clear what you were doing last night, Nick."

He flinched. "Not all night. I tried to find him, Nat. I went back to The Raven, but he was gone. So was Janette. I flew all night, searching for them,but ... "

Coldly, she said, "So what are you going to do? You must have thought of something."

He nodded. "I'll hire a private detective to keep him under twenty four hour surveillance."

She stared. "Hire a private -- on a cop's salary? Are you out of your mind?" He looked at her. "Oh. Of course. I forgot." She took a deep breath. Let it out. "And is putting Alex under surveillance going to be enough? You can't tell whoever you hire what they're protecting him from. Who's going to protect them? They'll be in as much danger as he is."

"Not if they don't interfere, and there's no reason they would," Nick said tiredly. "It'll be a watching brief only."

"It's still not enough."

"He'll be with me a lot of the time," Nick pointed out. "And the nights we're not working together, I'll stay close."

Natalie hugged her arms to her body. "What about another vampire? One you can trust to help you?"

He shook his head. "Janette's with LaCroix. There is no one else."

She began to pace. "Terrific."

"There's nothing else I can do, Nat!"

She stopped. Turned. "You could tell him the truth."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"*I* know."

He wanted another drink. He said, "Yes, but that was a mistake, wasn't it? You were never supposed to know. No one is supposed to know."

"You told Sarah!"

"Oh come on, Nat. Sarah woke up one morning thinking she was your brother's widow when in fact she was married to a vampire. I had no choice."

"Well, what about that clairvoyant? Denise Ford? You told her!"

He really wanted another drink. "I told Denise to save her sanity. And that's how she died. Sane. Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

She closed the distance between them. Leaned over the table and struck it with her fist. "Nick, you can't not tell him! It's the only way he can protect himself!"

"I'll protect him!"

"How? You can't even protect yourself, you've as good as admitted it! How are you going to protect Alex? Please, Nick, I'm begging you. Tell him."

He made himself look at her. "The last time you begged me to do something, we both ended up regretting it."

She flinched as though he'd struck her. "You *bastard* ..." she whispered. "Are you going to sit there and tell me that in eight hundred years you've never told anyone, *anyone*, what you are?"

He didn't answer straight away. At last he said, "No. I have told ... a few. I almost always came to regret it. The risk is too great, Natalie."

Her scorn flayed him. "For you?"

"And for him. Our existence is supposed to be a secret. Most mortals who discover us don't live long enough to tell anyone about it. And Alex --"

"What about Alex?"

He rested his head in his hands for a moment. Looked up. "Alex has strong views on murderers, Natalie. If he knew what I am, he'd denounce me. It's unlikely he'd be believed, but he'd draw the wrong kind of attention to himself. He'd be killed."

There were tears in her voice. "Alex would never do anything to hurt you, Nick. He's your friend."

"He might have been. I wanted him to be. If things were different ... but I've only known him a matter of weeks. I can't take the chance."

She sat opposite him again. Stretched out her hands in supplication. "He's a good man, Nick. He won't betray you."

Gently, he said, "Richard was a good man, too. Remember?"

Her hands snatched away as if he had burned them. Her eyes had never looked so wounded. She said, "If anything happens to Alex, Nick. If anything happens ... I swear, I will never forgive you. Never."

The loft was as silent as a tomb, after she left. He threw himself face down on the lounge. He couldn't tell Alex. Alex wasn't Natalie. Alex would never accept that he'd done what he'd done out of necessity. Why should he? It wasn't true. Not completely. And his hatred of murder, of murderers, was no passing whim.

But if he didn't tell him ...

He would just have to find LaCroix first. Janette would know where he was. She'd tell him. She owed him. And then he could save Alex. Save the man Natalie loved.

Deep inside himself, in the despicable, jealous centre of him that had caused such pain in the past, a tiny voice whispered *and if you don't ...*

He threw himself from the lounge. No. He wasn't that person any more. He wasn't the vampire who had killed the ballerina.

"I'm not," he said, to the empty room. "I'm not."

Beyond the cool safety of the shutters, the sun burned hot and bright. Hours to wait, before he could see Janette.

Damn the light anyway. Damn it to hell.

CHAPTER TWELVE

He slept fitfully throughout the day and went into the 27th early. He'd be glad when this split precinct business was over. It was ... unsettling.

"Knight!"

Nick hesitated, then turned to face Stonetree. The Captain crooked a forefinger. Nick sighed, and threaded his way between the crowded desks.

"Evening, Captain. Look, about last night. I'm sorry. I wasn't feeling very well, and --"

"Yeah. Haid said you'd picked up some kind of gastric bug. Probably caught it off your friend Miss Dubois." Stonetree scowled. "But God invented telephones so homicide detectives could call in sick. Remember that next time, will you?"

"I will."

Stonetree didn't look convinced. "Huh. Now go find your partner. He's come up with something on one of our potential suspects."

Alex was on the phone, looking harassed. He nodded when he saw Nick. Didn't smile. Because of the conversation, or the previous night Nick couldn't tell. But he could guess.

"Yeah, yeah, I know all that. And I know what time it is. Just do it anyway, would you? We still haven't found Tammy McCartney. And the next kid who gets snatched might be yours." He jammed the phone down.

"Got a minute?" said Nick, and indicated an adjacent interview room. It was empty.

"Half a minute," Alex said grudgingly.

Closing the door behind them, Nick said, "Thanks. For covering for me with Stonetree. You didn't have to do that."

Alex said, "You're my partner. What choice did I have?"

Nick thrust his hands into his pockets. "I'm sorry. It was unprofessional of me."

"From what I can see a lot of what you do is unprofessional. Beats me how you manage your arrest record."

Nick looked at him sharply. "And what's that supposed to mean?"

Alex sighed. "Nothing. I don't suppose you'd like to fill me in on what really happened last night? I don't mean about Eddie. We'll just take it that you didn't like the smell of his after shave, and leave it at that. I'm talking about your spectacular dereliction of duty. And your detour via the vat. You know, Natalie must be one hell of a doctor. You should be comatose with a hangover, at least."

Nick looked away. "I'm sorry. I can't tell you."

"You can't," Alex repeated, nodding slowly.

"It's personal, and complicated. I'm sorry."

Alex unfolded his arms and scratched at the stubble on his chin. "Sure. I take it Natalie knows?"

"She won't tell you, Alex," Nick said quickly. "Not even for my own good."

Alex hit the table. "Sonofabitch! You think I'm going to run off to Natalie, try and get her to tell me your grubby little secrets? I know she wouldn't tell me. It's perfectly clear where her loyalties lie."

The angry pain beneath his words cut like a knife. Nick bit his lip. "Alex. Natalie likes you. A lot. She --"

Alex's hand came up. "Not another word. Not about that."

Nick nodded. Took one hand from his pocket and tapped his finger against the back of a chair. "About Eddie Cross ..."

"Or that," said Alex. Let's just keep things strictly business, shall we? That seems to be how you like to operate. About the case. Looks like one of our pet pedophiles has been lying through his teeth. Mitchell Swayne. I wasn't happy about his statement, so I checked out a few things. He was at the Colonial Rest Motel, all right, but not on the nights he said he was."

"That's good work, Alex," said Nick. "Look. I -- I need a favor."

Alex looked at him. "A favor."

"I need to go out for an hour. Can you hold the fort here?"

"Out where?" said Alex, then held up his hand. "Of course. You can't tell me."

"I'm sorry, Alex. I told you, it's complicated. And very, very important."
"I'm sure it is," said Alex.
"I'll clear it with Stonetree. Make sure you get time in lieu, or --"
Alex pushed away from the table. "Whatever, Nick," he said, heading for the door. "Whatever."

He stood outside Raven's rear entrance. He had no sense of LaCroix's presence, but that meant nothing. The door opened.
"He isn't here," said Janette.
"Then where is he?"
She closed the door behind her and leaned against it. Did not smile. Nor lift her cheek, her lips, for his kisses. Her eyes were dark, and smudged with shadows.
"You know I cannot tell you."
"Dammit, Janette!" He let his hands fall back to his sides. "He's going to hurt Alex."
Her chin came up. "And whose fault is that? How many times must I tell you, Nicola? When will you learn? It isn't safe to play with mortals. Not for you, and not for them."
He let the mask slip for a moment. Snarled. "Don't lecture me, Janette. I'm not in the mood." She did not recoil. He knew then, as really he had always known, that although he had the power to frighten her, there would always be one of whom she was more afraid. He stretched one hand towards her. "Janette? Please? I have to stop him."
"Stop him?" She laughed. "*Stop* him? Do you have any idea of what you've done? *Imbecile* ! If I thought it would do any good I would tell you to run, now, and never come back. Oh, *Nicola* !" She spun about, pressed her cheek to the door. Her closed eyelids were delicately translucent. "We were free. *Free,*" she whispered. "And now he is back ..."
"And, no doubt ... very disappointed," he said heavily.
Her eyes were still closed. "Disappointed? I would rejoice if he were merely disappointed." Wearily she pushed herself away from the door. Still would not look at him. "Go. I cannot help you."
"Janette ..."
"*Allez* !"
Sick, he turned away from her. Barely felt the concrete beneath his feet as he moved to the car.
"Nicola?"
He stopped. Looked back over his shoulder. She was staring after him, her eyes glinting crimson in the dim light.
"Do not come back."

Natalie wasn't pleased to see him either.
"Make it quick," she said, brusquely. "I've got a lot to do."
"Janette won't tell me where he is."
"Gosh," she said, lining up her scalpels with precision. "Maybe we should all enrol in an effective interpersonal communication class."
"Nat ..."
She darted him a look. "No. You won't get absolution this time."
You could never drive me away. You could only leave.
"Nat ..."
Now she was separating pairs of latex gloves. "Have you hired a private detective yet?"
"Yes."
"Who?"
"Mick Rogan. He's the best. He --"
"Yes," she said. "I've heard of him." There was a styrofoam cooler on the floor next to her desk. She kicked it. "Take this with you on your way out."
"What is it?"
"Supplies." Her expression was still unforgiving. "I wasn't sure how long it would take you to restock your fridge."

He closed his eyes. "Nat. You said something about emergency leave."

"What about it?"

"Take it. Go to Hawaii. New Zealand."

She stopped unwrapping fresh scalpel blades. "What?"

He said, "Get out of town."

"And leave Alex? No."

She started across the lab. He blocked her path. "Nat. You don't know LaCroix. This time he might not stop at one."

She swallowed. "And how would he find out about me? From you?"

He said nothing. Watched the blood drain from her cheeks.

"You'd *tell* him?" she whispered.

He reached for her hands. "I told you. He's my master."

"No!" She pulled her hands free. "You belong to yourself."

Softly, sadly, he said, "I don't. I haven't for a very long time. Perhaps I never did. Please, Nat, if you -- if you care anything for me, leave."

She stepped back. "No. I won't have my life disrupted. Not by you, or LaCroix, or Alex, or anybody. This is my life. *I* decide where I go, and when I go. Nobody else."

He stared into her eyes. Focussed his will. "Natalie. You can't stay here. You must leave. Tonight."

She rushed at him, hitting him in the chest with both fists. "Stop it! That won't work, you know it won't. And if you try it again I'll --"

"I know," he said quietly. "You'll never forgive me."

"Oh, *Nick* !"she cried. "God! How did this happen? How did we get ourselves into this mess?"

"It's my fault," he said. "And I swear, Natalie, I swear I'll get us out of it."

"I want to believe you," she whispered. "But all I'm sure of right now is that I'm scared. And I'm angry. And I want all of this to go away."

"Nat --" The phone in his pocket trilled. Relieved, harassed, he answered it. "Knight... What? When? ... I'll be right there."

"What?" demanded Natalie, as Nick shoved the phone away. "An eyewitness has come forward in the case."

"The child murders? Seriously? That's fantastic."

"Yes. I have to go. Natalie ..."

"Save it for later." She was shrugging out of her lab coat. "I'm coming with you. I don't know what help I'll be, but you never know. Besides, I want to catch these bastards as much as you do."

"All right. Hurry."

"Hey," she said as he headed for the door. He turned. She pointed at the cooler by the desk. "Don't forget your dinner." She snatched up her bag and keys. "I'll take my own car. See you at the precinct."

"Okay," he said. Stood aside to let her out, then picked up the cooler.

Oh, Nat.

"They've been on vacation in Europe," Stonetree told Nick and Natalie as they waited for Alex to come back to the station with Mr and Mrs Bob Harris and their three children Bobby Junior, fifteen, Eric, eleven and Susie, nine. "The afternoon before they left, the daughter was playing in the local park. Some guy tried to snatch her, but the younger brother managed to get her away from him."

"And they waited till now to report it?" Natalie demanded.

Stonetree heaved a deep sigh. "I wish. No. Mr Harris reported it all right, to Officer O'Neil of this precinct. Who then got a phone call to say his father had been critically injured in a car wreck in Houston. Exit Officer O'Neil."

"He never finished writing up the report," breathed Natalie. "Dear God. Does he know?"

"Not yet. No point telling him in the middle of the night." He sighed again. "Of course, this could be an unrelated crime. Just a coincidence."

Natalie grimaced. "That's an awfully big coincidence."

"I'm trying not to get my hopes up," said Stonetree, with a strained smile.

Ten minutes later Alex returned with with Harrises and their children. Natalie, watching him with a churning mixture of fear and guilt, counted the tell tale signs of exhaustion in him: the peculiar flatness of his voice, the over careful gestures, the deepening hollows of his face. This case was driving him without mercy.

And then she saw the look in his eyes as he saw her, and knew that the case wasn't the only source of his pain.

She felt like a traitor.

"Hey, Nat," he said, and touched her shoulder with his fingertips. "What are you doing here?"

"I was with --" she began, then stopped. Conscious of Nick standing two feet away. Conscious of Alex's stony disregard of him. "I heard about the eyewitness," she said.

He nodded. "Uh huh. Well, you might as well sit in on the discussion."

"Please," she said.

His smile cut her like a knife.

The Harrises were nice people who now felt sick when they realised what their daughter had most likely escaped. Luckily Susie was a bright child with a good memory. She told her story sensibly, without hysterical embellishment. Eric backed her up, and was able to provide a partial number plate. An American plate. Best of all, they remembered what the man had looked like.

"He had a funny face," said Susie.

"Yeah," said Eric.

"Funny how?" said Alex.

The children glanced sidelong at their parents. "It's okay," said their mother. "Just say what you saw."

"He looked like a pig," said Susie, then added to her mother, "He did, Mom, he really did. And his mouth was all weird too."

Despite her concern, Joanne Harris smiled. "We're very strict with the children about making fun of people who are different."

"It's okay," said Alex. "You're not making fun of anyone, you're just saying what you saw in the best way you can. You're both being very helpful, and everyone here appreciates it. Can you describe anything else? Was he old? Young? Did he have hair? Or was he bald? What kind of clothes was he wearing?"

Eric said, "He was old. Like you," he added to Stonetree. "I mean, he was going bald like you, and he was a bit flabby like you, but he had more wrinkles."

Stonetree cleared his throat. "Thank heaven for small mercies."

"His hair was grey, and crinkly," said Susie. "I don't really remember what he was wearing."

"That's okay," said Alex. "He probably would have changed his clothes by now."

The children giggled. Natalie, who'd grabbed a pen and notepad, stopped drawing and moved forward to crouch beside them. She showed them her sketch. "Is this what you meant by weird, like a pig?"

"Yeah!" Eric said, and looked at her admiringly.

"Susie?"

She nodded. "Uh huh. Like that."

Natalie looked up at Nick, and Alex, and Stonetree. "Cleft palate. Badly reconstructed. Puts him in his middle to late fifties."

"You're sure?" said Alex.

"The techniques were pretty rough and ready back then. Nowadays you can hardly tell."

There was a knock on the interview room door, and it opened. "Captain, Dave's here," a uniformed officer said.

"Thanks, Patty," said Stonetree. He looked at the children. "Dave's a police artist. What we need now is for you to help him make up a picture on the computer of the man who tried to kidnap you," he said. "Take as long as you like, and change your minds as many times as you need to. The most important thing is that we get it right." He looked at Bob and Joanne Harris. "This could take a while. Would you folks like anything? Coffee, food?"

"Coffee sounds wonderful. And maybe a sandwich?" Bob Harris said. "Thank you very much."

"And maybe some milk and cookies for the kids. Coming right up," said Stonetree. "We'll leave you to work with the artist now. And again, I can't tell you how much we appreciate you coming down here in the middle of the night, especially after such a long flight and the delays at the airport and everything."

"It's nothing," Joanne Harris said. "He has to be stopped, quickly."

"Amen to that," said Stonetree. He nodded to them, glanced at his subordinates and led the way out of the interview room. "I've got a lot of phone calls to make," he said. "If our perp is an American citizen, we're looking at paperwork up the wazoo. Haid, what time did you sign on today?"

"A quarter to nine," said Alex.

Stonetree scowled. "This morning? Then get the hell outa here. You're screwing up my o/t budget."

"But, Captain, I --"

"You heard me." He shook his head. "Besides, you look like hell. Knight, you get to work on tracking down that plate. It's going to take forever to get a match. You'll need to check it with every motor registry Stateside. Start with the ones closest to the border first. Once the kids have finished with Dave, run copies of the portrait. Flood the city with them. Flood Canada. The world. I want this bastard. Is that clear?"

"I'm right on it, Captain."

"Well," said Natalie indistinctly, smothering a yawn, "I should head back to work. I'll see you two around."

Alex said, "Can I tempt you with a quick coffee at Barney's first? Maybe even a Danish?"

She glanced at her watch. "Oooh, I think I could just manage that." She reached for her coat and handbag.

Nick handed them to her. "Nat, I --"

"Later," she said flatly.

He stepped back. "Okay."

She and Alex left the station house together, his hand resting casually on her shoulder. He'd said nothing to Nick, just given him a curt nod as he shrugged into his coat.

Aching, Nick watched them go, then wrenched his mind back to the job.

The night air was cool but not unpleasant. Alex smiled at Natalie.

"Friends can still hold hands, right?" he asked.

"Sure," she agreed, and folded her fingers around his. God, the simple warmth of human contact. *Nick.* Her vision blurred and she turned her head slightly, in case Alex should notice.

They strolled down the road towards the cafe. He said, "It's none of my business, Natalie. I know that. But I care about you. Do you think he's capable of making you happy?

"Yes."

"How? When he's so unhappy himself?"

The denial was automatic. Imperative. "He's not unhappy."

"Yeah. Sure. It's just an excess of *joie de vivre* that sends him head first into the bottle, right? Natalie, come on."

She tried to pull her hand free but he wouldn't let go. She said, "All right. There are some problems, but --"

"Problems?" Alex sighed, exasperated. "Demons, more like. And I don't think he gets a moment's respite from them. Do you?"

Doggedly she said, "He's working things out. *We're* working things out."

"Working things out?" he echoed. "What was that in there, then?"

"Alex. Please. You promised you wouldn't push."

He groaned. "I know. I know."

She gave his hand a little shake. "If you really want to do something to help, tempt me with the biggest, stickiest Danish in the cafe," she said, trying to smile. "And don't let me resist too hard."

Alex stopped. Turned to face her, and placed his hands on her shoulders. "What I want to do is --"

"What?" she said. His expression frightened her. "Alex, what is it?"

Casually he turned back again, and draped an arm over her shoulder. His other hand opened his jacket and loosened his gun in its holster

"Just keep walking. Slowly. there's nothing to be afraid of. I'm being followed. In a moment I'm going to push you to one side. Find some cover."

"Followed? Who by?"

"I don't know. I thought I picked someone up this morning, as I left the 27th and headed over to the 89th. I saw him again tonight, when I went to get the Harrises. And he's parked four cars back."

God. The private detective. Rogan. Nick would be furious. And if Alex confronted him ... seven different scenarios of disaster flashed into her head. God, *God.*

"Alex."

His arm tightened briefly. "I'll be okay. Don't worry. On three. One --"

"Alex, it's all right."

"Of course it is. Two --"

Natalie stopped. Forced him to stop beside her. She took a deep breath, and looked into his taut face. "The man following you is a private detective."

"I beg your pardon?"

"He's a private detective, Alex."

"How do you know that? Who would --" He stopped. "Shit. *Shit.* I'll kill him."

"No, Alex, you musn't. It's for your own safety."

"My *safety*? Natalie, what the *hell* is going on here?"

She had to look away. "I'm sorry. I can't tell you."

"You can't tell me," said Alex. He pulled his arm away. "God Almighty. You two really are a match made in heaven."

"Alex!" said Natalie, because he had spun about and was striding back up the street. His fury was palpable.

Alex wasn't Schanke. Dear, trusting, gullible Schank. Alex would never in a million years believe evaporating blood, or macrobiotic diets, or any of the other stories invented to satisfy Don's shallow curiosity.

If Alex reached the precinct. If he confronted Nick in public. If he demanded to know why Nick had hired the detective. What he had against Eddie Cross. Where the proof was of Eddie's crimes. Who Eddie Cross was, really.

If she didn't stop him.

Oh, God, oh God. If only Nick didn't find out.

"Alex!" she shouted. "All right!" He stopped, one and a half cars from catastrophe. She hurried to catch up with him, caught at his arm, which was as malleable as steel. "All right," she said quietly. "I'll tell you. But not here. At my place."

He looked down at her. "The truth?"

"The truth. I swear it. Even though it's the last thing you really want to hear."

He searched for lightness. "Know the truth, and the truth shall set you free."

She shook her head. "Trust me. Not this truth."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Having declined a drink, Alex watched Natalie pour herself a hefty four fingers of scotch and knock it straight back. "More dutch courage?" he said, disquiet churning his empty stomach.

Grimly she replied, "If I didn't need a clear head more than I need to be drunk right now, I'd swallow the lot."

"Natalie ..."

Her eyes were haunted. "You need to know, Alex. But if I tell you, I betray his trust. And if I don't, I risk your life. Great choice, huh?"

Her pain hurt him. He wanted to get off the couch, take her in his arms and kiss the torment from her face. He didn't have the right. And even if he did, he doubted she'd let him. Natalie's vulnerabilities were well hidden. Rarely displayed. She was pacing the living room now, arms held close to her body, jaw clenched. She wouldn't look at him.

"I"m sorry," he said, "but you have to know how I feel. I'm not just going to sit on my hands while he makes these kinds of decisions about my life. Without my consent. My input, even."

Pained amusement flickered in her eyes. What was she remembering? She said, "Yes. He can be very high handed. It's part of what he is."

"And what's that?"

She didn't answer. Just kept pacing, from book case to table to sideboard and back again.

"If I tell you," she said, "you have to swear you will never, ever tell another living soul. You have to swear you'll go to your grave without repeating a word of what I'm about to say."

"Natalie, come on. Aren't you being just a little melodramatic I mean, how bad can this be?"

She jerked to a halt. "Worse than you can possibly imagine, Alex. And the only reason I'm telling you is because it could save your life. And his. So swear. By whatever you hold most sacred."

She really wasn't kidding. "Okay," he said. "I swear, by the cross Christ died on, that I will never tell another soul what you're about to tell me."

Some of the tension went out of her, but still she didn't speak.

"Natalie, come on. The suspense is killing me!"

"Eddie Cross," she said.

Impatience prickled him. "What about him?"

"That isn't his real name. His real name is LaCroix."

Alex stared. "And that's a crime? He changed his name? For God's sake, Natalie, would you stop hedging and just come out with it? I'm tired. I'm fed up. I want to know what the hell is going on here."

She stopped dead. Turned her head inch by slow inch, and looked at him. "Your ... friend, Eddie Cross. LaCroix. He's at least two thousand years old. He's a vampire."

Alex laughed. "Come again?"

There was no amusement in her face. Her eyes were distant, cold. "This isn't funny," she said.

"Not funny?" He sat back. "Natalie, it's hysterical. You expect me to believe that Eddie is a vampire? Top hat, tails, evening cape and *I vant to suck your blood* ? Sure, Natalie."

"It's true."

He waved one hand, vaguely. "Uh huh. And I suppose you're playing Mina to Nick's Van Helsing, are you? No, that doesn't fit." He snapped his fingers. "I know. *You're* Buffy the Vampire Slayer, right?"

Still she didn't smile. He wondered, briefly, if this was just some crazy dream brought on by overwork. That in a minute, or an hour, he would wake up in his own bed. And all of this would be just so much nonsense to dismiss without a second thought.

Natalie said, "Alex."

He raked his fingers through his hair. "Natalie. Come on. Next you'll be telling me that *you're* a vampire too."

She shook her head. "No. I'm as human as you are."

Something in the way she said it caught in his chest. Suddenly it was like breathing barbed wire. He sat up.

She said, "It was my twenty eighth birthday. I was working. A body came in. Very dead. Some guy who'd been blown to bits by a pipe bomb. I opened the bag. He was in one piece. Didn't look too bad. I thought someone had made a mistake. I got on the phone to check and ... he got off the dissection table."

"You're standing there, stone cold sober -- well, almost -- telling me that Nick is a vampire?" Alex said. He'd laugh, if he could remember how.

"Yes," said Natalie.

"I don't believe you," Alex whispered. "It isn't true. It *can't* be."

She seemed to be searching for words. Said at last, "I've seen him fly."

Alex wiped his palms on his knees. "Who else knows?"

"Nobody."

"Don?"

Her smile was affectionate, and far too brief. "Schanke thinks he has an eccentric partner who suffers from an exotic skin condition."

"Sunlight?"

"Will kill him."

He wanted to move. To shake her. To run. Shock held him rigid.

"Churches?"

"Terrify him. Because of the crosses, and the holy water. He says ..." Her voice cracked, a hairline of distress threatening to shatter the desperate pragmatism. "He says it's because he's evil but he isn't, Alex. He isn't. He has compassion and honour and justice and a conscience that spurs him bloody every minute of every day, waking or sleeping. He can't, he won't forgive himself for what he is, and what he's done."

"What he's done?" Alex repeated. "What do you mean? What has Nick done? I don't --" And then he stopped, because the answer was obvious. Vampires, if the books and movies were to be believed, didn't eat burgers and fries and pepperoni pizza. Vampires drank blood. *Human* blood.

Oh, God.

Natalie hugged herself tighter. Stared at nothing, or memories she'd probably never share. "It's true, he's done some terrible things. But that's in the past. He hasn't killed a human --" She stopped. Closed her eyes. He had no idea what caused this briefer, sharper pain. "He hasn't killed a human for their blood in more than a century."

Alex jerked. "A *century* ? How old is he?"

Tiredly, she answered him. "He became a vampire in 1228."

1228. The thirteenth century. Cautiously, Alex tasted the idea. His current, temporary partner, his abortive friend, was nearly eight centuries old. He could never go out in the sun. He existed on blood.

He was a vampire.

"God Almighty," said Alex. "So ... if he doesn't drink human blood anymore.. " God, the thought alone made him want to vomit."How does he -- what does he --"

"Cow," said Natalie. "He drinks cow blood."

Eight centuries. Okay. Even if he hadn't killed anyone in the last hundred years, that still left seven centuries worth of drinking human blood. How often did a vampire need to feed? Once a day? Twice a day? As often as he damn well felt like it? How many people did that add up to?

Take a conservative estimate. Say, one person a day. Just one. Three hundred and sixty five days in a year, times seven hundred adds up to ...

"Oh my God," Alex said. "Natalie, you're in love with a mass murderer!"

"No!" She took a step towards him "He had to survive. And he's sorry, Alex, you don't know how sorry he is!"

He couldn't believe what he was hearing. "He's *sorry*, so that makes it all right? Natalie, I put people in jail who think that way. For God's sake, *Nick* puts people in jail who -- I mean, doesn't it strike you as just the tiniest bit hypocritical?"

"Oh God," said Natalie. "I wish I'd never told you."

"Yeah, well, I wish you'd never told me too, but it's a bit late for that now!" Alex retorted. "The point is, I know. Now I have to decide what to do about it."

"Do?" Natalie stared at him. "There's nothing you can do, Alex. You *promised.* God, if he ever finds out I told you he'd never forgive me. He trusts me. He trusts me, and I've betrayed him."

"Betrayed him? Natalie, he isn't even *human!* How can you -- " He stopped. Couldn't bring himself to say the words. It hurt too damned much.

She said them for him. "Love him?"

"Yes," he whispered. "How can you?" Love him, and not me.

It was some time before she answered him. When she did she was hesitant. Faltering. Almost as though she'd never stopped to ask herself the question. Or answer it.

Maybe she hadn't.

She said, "That night. In my lab. He was so -- lost. So cold. Devoid of hope. His pain filled the room. We met again, in the street. I offered to help him. He laughed at me, and walked away. I thought that was the end of it. But three weeks later he came back. He said, 'I am so desperate I will turn to a child.'"

"A child?" said Alex, startled.

She shrugged. "I suppose, to him, we must all seem like children."

He hadn't considered that. "I suppose."

Natalie leaned against the table. "I said yes. I didn't see him again for a month. I thought he'd changed his mind. Then I was dropping a report into the 27th one night, and there he was. Working. Stonetree introduced us." She smiled, wonderingly. "Till that moment, I didn't even know his name."

"Okay," said Alex, slowly. "I guess I can see how you'd feel sorry for him, maybe, but ... "

She stared at the carpet. "Alex, I'm not sure I can answer you. I love his courage. His willingness to fight the pain, and the fear, and the memories. Vampires don't forget. He remembers ... everything. Every face. Every scream. Every life taken. And somehow, God only knows, he's managed to keep his sanity. His humanity."

"Humanity?"

Her face was fierce. "Yes. Alex, can't you see? He lives his life surrounded by mirrors. Staring into the eyes of his own crimes, night after night after night. Because he's sorry. And he wants to make amends."

From beyond the curtained windows came the sound of cars, swishing down the street. Alex rubbed his closed eyes. He believed her. Or at least, he believed she believed herself.

It didn't help.

Nick had spent seven centuries murdering. *Seven centuries.* It would take a damn sight more than two and a half years of night shifts to wipe his slate clean. This wasn't a case of twenty Hail Mary's and five stations of the Cross.

If he had taken his vows. If Nick had come to him to confess. What then? What penance could he impose that would match the barbarity of his life? The magnitude of his crimes?

There was none

And as for Natalie ... how could she be sure this wasn't just a phase? How could she know that his dreadful lust for blood wouldn't erupt one day and destroy her?

He looked at her.

"Natalie. Are you -- is he -- your lover?"

She flinched. "No."

"Why not?"

She raised her eyes to meet his. "Because he doesn't trust himself."

Sickened, he said, "What? You mean he'd actually -- God, Natalie!"

Her eyes were brilliant with unshed tears. "If he didn't ... care, he wouldn't keep his distance."

A wave of dreadful pity obliterated his anger, his revulsion, his horror.

She was so alone.

He said, as gently as he knew how, "Natalie. You must realise, there's no future for you, with him?"

Her chin came up. "I don't accept that. Nick believes he can be human again, Alex. It's the only reason he's still alive. We both believe it. We've made tremendous progress. We'll find the way back. We will."

He wondered who she was trying hardest to convince. The skepticism must have shown in his face. Fiercely she said, "I believe in him, Alex."

He was very tired. "I know you do," he said quietly. "And you don't have to worry, Nat. I keep my promises."

"Thank you," she whispered.

He looked at her. "So tell me. Where does Eddie -- LaCroix fit in?"

She came to sit beside him. "LaCroix was Nick's master."

"His *what* ?"

She shrugged. "He said once that LaCroix was like a father, or a brother. But it's much more than that. It was LaCroix who made Nick a vampire."

"Against his will?" Please God, let it have been against his will. Let there be one redeeming factor in this sorry mess.

Natalie was shaking her head. Looking at the carpet. "No. He wanted it. But he didn't realise what it meant. He was --" Her hands mirrored her struggle for words. "Seduced. It was only afterwards, after his first kill, that he understood what he'd done."

Alex said, "A case of sin in haste and repent in leisure?"

"Yes. And he repents. Oh Alex, he repents."

She was close to tears. It would have been cruel, to point out the obvious to her. To say, aloud, that Nick had gone for seven centuries bloodily unrepentant. To ask, if he was so sorry after the first kill, then why did he keep on killing?

Molly's killer. The same man they were hunting now, perhaps. He could lie awake nights, haunted by a child's scream, by the blood and the fear he left in his wake like the trail of some monstrous slug.

He could be sorry.

So what?

Natalie was trembling. He put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. Eased them both back against the cushions.

She said, "I worry about him, you know? All the time. About where he is. Who he's with. What time it is. Whether he can get home before the sunrise. And about whether --" She stopped.

"What?"

"Oh. Nothing. Everything."

She was lying. He could, perhaps, guess the truth. He didn't try. He said, "LaCroix."

She sighed. "Nick hates him. And loves him. He thought he'd killed him."

"How can you kill someone who's already dead?" said Alex. He wanted to laugh. This was all so -- ridiculous. But the laughter froze in his throat.

"Don't joke," Natalie warned him. "You're in serious danger."

"What, from Eddie? Why?"

She jabbed him with her elbow. "Think, Alex. Nick tried to kill LaCroix. LaCroix is angry with him. He's seen the two of you together. Having mortal fun. Making mortal music. He knows you're Nick's friend."

"Revenge?" Alex said. Again, the ludicrous impulse to laugh.

She was silent for a moment. "Nick doesn't tell me a lot. Not about the -- the darker times. But I know this. I know that LaCroix has always punished him for --" She looked for a word. "Disobedience."

Alex grimaced. "This is sick."

Quietly, Natalie said, "Nick would be the first to agree with you."

Once, a long time ago, I gave my soul to God. Then I took it back and gave it to someone else.

Oh, yes, thought Alex. Sin in haste and repent in leisure, indeed.

They sat for a time in silence. Alex let his fingers tease a strand of her hair. She didn't pull away. He kissed her again.

"I wish there was something I could say, or do, to fix this."

"Listening is good," said Natalie.

"But it doesn't change anything!" he protested.

He felt her head move against him as she nodded. "It does. It helps me feel ... less alone."

He tightened his arm around her. "You're not alone, Nat."

She turned her face into his shoulder. "Thank you."

"I love you."

"I'm sorry," she said, and shivered.

Tucking his finger under her chin, he gently forced her to look at him. "Don't be," he whispered. "I'm not."

She sat up and smoothed her skirt over her knees. "You have to get out of town, Alex. Go somewhere safe until this is over."

His denial was automatic. "I can't do that. The Castelli case --"

"May never be solved, even with the Harris kids description." She twisted around slightly. He loved her profile. The generous sweep of her eyelashes. The straight nose. The full lips. Her sweetly rounded, childish chin. She said, "You know what it's like with kids. They --"

"I won't go," he said flatly. "I won't be forced out of my life by anybody." He made himself smile. "Not even a two thousand year old vampire in a bad mood."

"For God's sake!" She elbowed her way off the couch. "This isn't funny! Don't you *understand* ? LaCroix has come back from the *dead.* Nick burned him to *ash,* and he's come back. He is capable of atrocities we can't comprehend. He is ancient, and powerful, and angry. Nick is terrified of him. And so should you be."

"Atrocities?" Alex echoed. "What atrocities?"

"I don't know, exactly. Nick's never told me. But I do know that he's killed to keep Nick with him, and to punish him for defiance."

Alex stared at her. "And I'm classed as defiance?"

"You'd better believe it. LaCroix thinks he owns Nick. Lock, stock and barrel. And Nick is half way to believing it himself."

She sat at the dining room table and rested her head in her hands. Alex slumped back against the couch and tried to make sense of the madness.

He liked Eddie Cross. Eddie had a dry, droll sense of humour. He knew a hell of a lot about music. He was a good listener. He laughed a lot. Not once, not for a second, had he felt unsafe sitting next to Eddie.

Or Nick.

"Please, Alex," said Natalie. "Please leave. I couldn't bear it if something happened to you."

He got up from the couch and stood behind her. Rested his hands on her shoulders, and kissed the top of her head. "LaCroix may be old, and he may be powerful, but God is older than time and more powerful than any vampire. If that wasn't so, Nick could kill in a church and not turn a hair."

She turned to face him. Went to speak, but he pressed his fingers to her lips.

"If anyone should be leaving," he said, "it's you."

Taking his hand in hers she said, "I'm in no danger. LaCroix doesn't know about me."

"And he doesn't know that I know the truth. I'll be careful. I won't say or do anything to make him suspicious. I'll just be too busy to take his calls."

"For how long?" Natalie demanded.

"I guess ... that's up to Nick."

Her eyes were haunted. "He's doing every thing he can to protect you, Alex."

"Everything except tell me the truth."

She looked away.

"Does he know where LaCroix is?'

"No. He's trying to find him."

"And when he does?"

"I don't know."

She sounded so lost. So folorn. Damn Nick to hell. If he wasn't already. She didn't deserve this.

"It'll be all right, Nat," he said.

"Will it?" she asked, almost too quietly to hear. Then she stood, and laid her palm against his cheek. "You look so tired. Why don't you sleep here? I'll make up the sofa bed."

He nodded towards the window. "What about Magnum PI out there? He'll be making a full report to Nick, you know."

"That's my problem."

She fetched linen, blankets and a pillow from a cupboard in the hall. Together they pulled apart the sofa and made up the bed. Every bone in his body resented it. He didn't want to sleep here, in exile. He wanted Natalie's bed, and Natalie beside him in it. Clearly Nick did not deny himself female companionship ... it wasn't fair that --

He straightened, stabbed by an appalling thought.

"Janette ..." he said.

Natalie was wrestling the pillow into a pillow slip. "What about her?"

The ball. The way they'd looked, moved. Touched each other. Beneath the obvious differences, the disturbing similarities. Natalie slammed the pillow onto the bed.

"Her too?" he said, resigned. "Is there anything else you haven't told me?"

"No."

"How long has he known her?" he asked.

Her smile was brief. Tight. Professional. "From the beginning. It was Janette who seduced him to LaCroix's hand."

"Janette sedu -- and he still --" He stopped. Shook his head. "I don't understand that. Do *you* understand it?"

She wouldn't look at him. "No."

He wanted to say, Oh, Natalie. He wanted to hold her again. He said, "Huh. The term 'old friends' takes on a whole new meaning, doesn't it?"

"Yes," said Natalie. "I'm off to bed. Sleep well."

Dropping his clothes to the floor, Alex crawled between the sheets with a groan. Lord, lord, he was so tired. But sleep eluded him. He couldn't blot the terrible images from his mind. Molly. Tina Wallis. Marco Castelli. Nick. Natalie. Eddie. Death. Blood.

She had to be wrong. Vampires weren't real. Eddie was just a guy. Nick wasn't a killer.

I've seen him fly.

Dear God.

Brother Andrew, for once in his nit-picking life, had been right.

He should have stayed in the seminary.

He woke just after daybreak, to the sound of a garbage truck wheezing and groaning its way along the street outside. Weariness pinned him to the sagging mattress. Crooking an arm across his face he tried to plunge back into the blessed ignorance of sleep. No luck. He got up.

Dressed, he tidied away the evidence of his overnight presence, and decided against making coffee. Kitchen noises might wake Natalie, and she needed to sleep. Last night she'd looked worn out, ground down by the pressures of the job and the burden of secrets she carried.

He looked in on her before he left. Unmoving, she lay curled beneath a patchwork quilt, hand tucked under her cheek, hair tumbled about the pillow. She slept like an innocent. As though death in all its incarnations was a stranger. He wanted to lay down beside her. Gather her against him and keep her safe from this unnatural vendetta he had no desire to understand.

He wanted to hold her.

Such a wit, she had. He loved her dry acerbity, her refusal to entertain such comfortable indulgences as self-pity, her willingness to shoulder another's pain and count it as her own. She was so fiercely determined to make the world spin only in the direction of her choosing.

He loved her. He didn't understand what love was, only that he felt it. He loved her, and she loved Nick. A simple impasse. The radio churned out variations on the theme around the clock.

There'd been a time when he thought he'd never have to deal with this. When he thought he'd be protected from pain and doubt of all kinds, saved by his armour of cassock and dog collar and faith. God had seen fit to inform him otherwise. He hadn't spoken to God for a long time afterwards.

That much, at least, he had in common with Nick. That, and Natalie.

She was so beautiful. He could close his eyes and see the perfect curve of her jaw. Drive a hundred miles and not leave behind the scent of her skin. The taste of her lips still lingered. He'd do anything for her. Even stay silent about the ... man ... she loved.

If You never grant me anything else, grant me this, he prayed. *Keep her safe.*

And gently closed the bedroom door.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Driving on automatic pilot, he didn't realise where his thoughts had led him until he stopped at a set of traffic lights and recognised the cross street before the turning to Nick's place.

Adrenaline seared his nerves.

Nick.

If he was ... what Natalie said he was ...

A vampire? It was a hundred times more unlikely in broad daylight.

He'd always prided himself on being a good judge of people. Had prepared himself for a life devoted to God. Didn't that count for anything? Give him some kind of advantagae? Surely he would have sensed *something* ? How could such evil exist, yet hide itself so completely?

Fear, black and voluptuous, rolled over in his belly.

His fingers reached for his grandmother's crucifix, hanging on its thin gold chain about his neck, and a measure of calm returned.

The blast of a car horn shocked him out of thought. The lights had turned green and the traffic was screeching its way around him. Drivers were yelling at him through their wound up windows, fingers gesticulating eloquently.

He eased forward and changed lanes, flicking on the left turn indicator. Nick would be home by now. The need to see him, to force all the jagged pieces of the picture into some kind of coherent whole, was overwhelming.

He parked his car and leaned on the intercom. "Yeah, Nick, it's me. I know you want to get to bed, but can I come up for a few minutes?" The door opened. He got into the elevator.

Nick was already in black silk pyjamas. Over them he wore a robe of dark crimson silk and brocade. Brocade, for God's sake.

From the couch he said, "You look like hell. Busy night?"

Alex looked at his partner. Saw his knowledge of where Alex had spent the night. It was in his eyes, churning him.

Ha. Serves you right.

"Yeah, it was busy," he agreed, and collapsed into a chair opposite. Pink Floyd was pounding from the stereo. 'The Wall'. Very depressing. Nick reached for the remote and turned it down.

Despite all his good intentions, Alex found himself staring. It really was incredible. Nothing, *nothing,* about him suggested the truth. Okay, sure, he was pale, but so what? The man was a vampire.

The eyes, maybe? Being windows to the soul and all that. Did they give any hint as to what Nick had seen? Done? He wasn't sure. Right now, they just looked resentful.

He'd seen Nick laugh. Show anger. Sorrow. Regret. Caught glimpses of despair. Been moved by his paintings. His music. Could a creature without a soul feel what Nick felt? Could a vampire still be human?

"Have I broken out in a rash, or something?"

Alex cursed. "Sorry. No. Just thinking."

Nick said, "Look. Alex. We need to straighten some things out. We won't be working together for much longer, but --"

"I know," said Alex. "I've been thinking. Maybe ... maybe I over reacted. This Eddie Cross business. Whatever else you are, you're a good cop, with good instincts. He seems perfectly harmless to me, but clearly you disagree. Does the guy have a record?"

Nick's face was so severely expressionless, it spoke volumes. "No. Nothing official."

"But you're convinced he's trouble?"

Nick nodded. "He's trouble."

Alex shrugged. "Okay, I'll lose him. I'm not really interested in a music career anyway. It's just for fun. A pressure valve after work."

Relief fissured Nick's expression. He pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes, hard, and for a long moment didn't speak.

Unaccountably, Alex found himself moved. The memory of Natalie, holding herself against the pain of her love, her knowledge, rose before him. Every minute of every day, waking or sleeping.

Maybe he did repent. Maybe he was truly sorry for the countless lives he had taken. But did that make a difference? How many convicted murderers claimed remorse? Sorrow after the fact was easy. Meaningless. How more meaningless, then, to kill over and over and over ... and each time say oh, but I'm truly sorry?

Confession, repentance, absolution: they weren't a merry go round. The idea was to say sorry, and not do it again. God was skeptical of repeat offenders.

Nick said, "I'm sorry things haven't worked out so well, Alex. I know I'm not easy to work with. Too used to having things my own way. I don't know how Schanke puts up with me."

He couldn't help himself. "Or Natalie?"

Nick's expression softened. "Nat ... is special."

Then why do you hurt her? Alex wanted to rage at him. Why flaunt Janette in her face? She isn't like you, she won't live forever. She deserves a life full of love, not worry and self-delusion.

He said, "You won't get any argument from me. So. What happened after I left last night?"

"We got a good likeness. The composite and a full description of the perp and the car have been circulated to all precincts, all the tv stations, over the border. We'll get good co-operation on this one."

"With any luck there won't be a rock big enough for him to hide under."

"Or at least, not for long." The security intercom buzzed. "Now who?" Nick said, groaning, and got up to answer it.

It was Schanke. "Come down and pay the cab driver, would you? I'm wearing my pyjamas."

"That makes two of us," said Nick. "Schanke, what the hell are you doing on my doorstep at sunrise, dressed in your pyjamas?"

"Never mind that now! Just grab your wallet and get down here!"

"Hold on," said Nick. He turned to Alex. "My life is turning into a Marx Brothers movie."

Alex groped in his rear pocket and pulled out his wallet. "Here," he said, and tossed it to Nick.

"Thanks," said Nick.

As the elevator trundled to ground level, Alex leaned back in the chair and surveyed the loft in the light of his new, unlooked for, unwelcome insights.

The sun. Everywhere the sun. On the walls, and in the paintings. How could he not have noticed that before? What an outpouring of longing. What hopeless yearning. He looked at the irrevocably shuttered windows, and tried to imagine a life without sunshine. Eight centuries of darkness, unleavened by a single golden moment. Worse than that. To know that what you most craved would kill you. And knowing it, crave it all the more.

Impossible.

The lift returned. The door slid back, and a voluble Schanke, Nick trailing in his wake, stepped out.

" -- hospital, Knight, not a frigging prison, all right? You're not my mother so just get off my back. Hi, Alex. I saw it on the early news. They still wake me up at the goddamned crack of dawn to stick thermometers in my face, so I turned on the news and I saw it. The drawing. Nick, I know that bastard. I *know* him."

Alex jumped up. "The suspect? You know him? Are you sure?"

Schanke retied the cord on his plaid dressing gown. "Of course I'm sure. You don't think I'd check myself out of hospital and drive half way across town in a cab in my pyjamas with no fare if I wasn't sure, do you?"

Nick, tossing Alex's wallet back to him, said, "Sit down, Schank. You look done in."

"I am. My legs feel like week old linguine." He subsided into the nearest chair. "I tell you, I nearly had a cardiac when I saw that identikit picture on the box."

"Why don't you start from the top," suggested Nick, perching on the arm of the lounge. Alex resumed his place in the chair.

"From the top. Okay. From the top," said Schanke, and made a concerted effort to pull himself together. "Okay. Frank Dystruk. My ex-partner. Best man at our wedding. I've told you about Frank?"

Nick's lips curved in a faint smile. "Once or twice. If memory serves, on the Baker stakeout, the Phillips stakeout, the New Year's Eve party, the Antonelli stakeout, the --"

"All right, all right," said Schanke. "Geez. Give me a break."

Alex watched Schanke exchange a rueful, exasperated, affectionate smile with Nick. Bitterly, he wondered what Don would do if he knew the truth about his partner. His friend. Would he smile then? Would he be so eager to sit in this room, vulnerable in pyjamas and dressing gown? Turn his back, even for a moment?

Don Schanke seemed like a nice guy. And even if he wasn't, nobody deserved the kind of deceit that was being practised upon him. The lies.

"The point is," said Schanke, "Frank and me worked this case, twelve years ago. Worst case I ever handled. I mean, Nick, I nightmared on this one for seven years. Kept having these flashbacks, you know what I'm saying?"

"I know."

Schanke shivered. "Even now, just thinking about it gives me the heebies. Anyway. Frank and me had this case. Child abduction, sexual assault and murder. All for the porn industry. Snuff movies. We got the guy. Had him dead to rights. He was going down, Nick, for good. He would never have made it out of jail alive, which suited all of us on the case just fine."

"What happened?" said Alex.

"Some stupid wet behind the ears recruit screwed up the chain of evidence. He walked. I came close to tossing in my badge over it. Some half assed technicality meant that scum, that slime, was free to go about his business after raping and murdering three little kids."

"He was living in Canada at the time?"

"That's right."

Alex said, "He's driving a US registered vehicle now, but that doesn't necessarily mean anything. He could be living there, or here. What's his name, anyway?"

Hatred altered Schanke's round, genial face. "McMurtry," he said. "Dallas McMurtry."

"And you're sure it's him?"

"Positive," said Schanke. "Now I don't know about the car. Or where he's set up business this time. The only thing I'm sure of is he's responsible for all of this. I'll lay you any odds you care to mention that he's gone back into movie making. My theory is that he *is* based Stateside. I think he's come into Canada to snatch the kids, killed them across the border, then brought the bodies back here, all to different precincts."

Alex frowned. "I can see why he'd take Candadian kids. That involves police forces of two countries. The paperwork alone could resink the Titanic. But why bring them back here? If he'd dumped them Stateside we might never have found out who they were. It doesn't make any sense."

"Who cares why he did it?" Schanke snapped. "The man's a psycho. Doing what he does to kids. And he must have thought he'd gotten away with it. Again. Even with the bungled kidnap attempt. When nothing came out on the news at the time —" Schanke punched the lounge in frustration. "Geez, I must be slipping. Why didn't I see the connection straight away? How could I be so dumb? How could I not make the *connection* ?"

"Easy, Schank," Nick said, and put a gentle hand on his shoulder. "You've had two bullets taken out of you and a lot on your mind these past few weeks. It was a long time ago."

Schanke shuddered. "I saw the films, Nick. I can still see them. Now with my eyes wide open I can see them. It could've been yesterday."

The phone rang. Nick answered it. "Yeah, Knight here. Yes, Myra, as a matter of fact he is. Hold on a minute." He held the receiver out to Schanke. With a grunt, Schanke got up and took it.

"Myra. No, wait, honey, I can explain. I -- what? When? Okay. Myra, thank you for finding me. This is real important, honey. What? Soon. I'll get a cab home real soon. No, I can't go back to the hospital. No. I'll explain later. Okay. Love you. Bye."

"Forget the cab," said Alex. "I'll drive you."

Schanke felt for a chair and sat down again. His face was pale, and drawn. He leaned back and closed his eyes. "Thanks. Myra says Frank's been trying to get a hold of me. He must have seen the early news too. Nick, you mind if I run up your phone bill?"

"Of course not," said Nick. "But don't get up again. Use the cellular."

Schanke called his ex-partner and arranged for him to fax all their old McMurtry case notes to the precinct. He called the precinct and warned them that the faxes would be coming through, and that they were top priority, not to be given to anybody else. He'd be there within the hour

Alex shook his head. "I can't believe it. From nothing to o this. So quickly."

"Happens all the time,"" said Schanke. "That's why you gotta keep on your toes in this job. Are you sure about driving me home? It's not out of your way, or anything?"

"No problem. You ready?"

With a grunt and a groan, Schanke levered himself to his feet, waving aside Nick's offer of help. "Ready. Nick, you get some shut eye. Alex and I can take it from here. We'll see you tonight."

"Shouldn't you be going back to the hospital?" said Nick. "Or at least home to bed?"

Schanke's expression was bleak. "I have seen enough hospital to last me into my next three lifetimes. And if I don't start using my legs soon, they're gonna to drop off due to redundancy. Trust me. I'm feeling better by the minute. Now you go to bed."

"Don't worry," said Alex. "I'll keep an eye on him."

Alone, Nick headed for refrigerator, dizzy with hunger and and weariness. If Schanke was right, they were three quarters of the way to closing the case. That would feel good. One less thing to worry about.

He bit the cork out of the bottle neck and spat it into his hand. Forced himself to pour a decent, restrained glassful and replace the cork, and the bottle. He could have drained the whole lot, easily, but he owed Natalie.

Natalie. And Alex. He had to keep them safe from LaCroix. *Had to.*

Sooner or later, he and LaCroix would meet. If he was careful, and clever, perhaps he could orchestrate the inevitable reckoning without the use of mortal pawns. Bleakly, he recognised that it was unlikely he would emerge unscathed. He rarely did. LaCroix had a heavy hand when ... disappointed.

The music had finished, and the loft was filled with silence, Nick switched off the stereo, went to bed, and stared at the ceiling.

Life's a bitch, and then you don't die.

Waking eight restless hours later he drank, and went to work. He had to fight his way through media crews camped on both sides of the street to get into the 27th station house. It was barely sunset. The skyline still reflected gold and pink: the colours played his nerves, pizzicato.

Ignoring the hammering questions he ducked through the doors and headed out back, where uproar and chaos danced hand in hand. Stonetree, limp shirted and darkly stubbled, was on one phone and dialling out on another. He looked exhausted but fiercely triumphant. Natalie sat behind O'Grady's desk. She was sorting through a huge pile of faxes. Hardly in a medical examiner's job description, but clearly this was a case of all hands on deck, man the pumps, and to hell with technicalities.

Alex came up behind her carrying a mug of something. Coffee, probably. He put it on the desk beside her, his other hand resting briefly on her head. He watched her smile up at Alex, that rare, sweet smile that saw him through nights of hunger and days of despair. Alex's face as he looked down at her was tender. Loving.

Nick turned away, and saw Schanke. Out of his pyjamas now, an achingly familiar figure in brown suit, green shirt and floral tie. Appalling. Fantastic. He looked worn out. There were lines in his face that hadn't been there six weeks ago. He was thinner, too, his clothes baggy where before they had been merely ill fitting.

He was propped in a corner, head resting on one hand, elbow balanced precariously on three square inches of unused desk space. He was asleep.

Nick crouched beside him and shook him gently. "Hey, Schanke."

Schanke jerked awake. "What? Have they got him?" Blinking, he focussed on Nick. "Knight. What time is it?"

"A quarter after eight. Maybe you should think about going home, eh? You don't want to over do it, your first day out of the hospital. Especially since you're not even supposed to be out of the hospital. Myra will be worrying."

"You're wasting your time," said Alex from behind him. "I've tried, Natalie's tried, Stonetree's tried. He won't budge."

Nick stood. Alex's smile was rueful, but behind the resigned humour was something else. Something in his eyes ...

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing," said Alex.

Natalie joined them. "Hi, Nick," she said, and let her gaze slip sideways.

"Nat."

Schanke said, "You should go get some help, all of you. Join Mother Hens Anonymous. I'm all right. I'm not leaving."

Nick hesitated. He could make Schanke go. Easily. He should. The precinct was no place for him, with his convalescence still in its infancy.

He turned to Alex. "What's happening?"

"We got a match on the plates. Dallas McMurtry. New York State. We got an address. Rochester. The warrant's been issued. Rochester PD's handling the actual arrest. Prescott's choppered down there. Stonetree's co-ordinating this end."

"If they get him —"

"When," said Schanke. "When they get him. He's not slipping through our fingers a second time."

"When they get him ... it'll mean an extradition hearing."

"Already in the pipeline," said Alex. "The Mayor's like a kid on Christmas Eve. He'd put a call through to the White House personally if he thought it'd get him more co-operation."

"No worries there?"

Alex shook his head. "No. There isn't a law enforcement professional between here and Rio de Janeiro who isn't turning somersaults to help." He smiled briefly. "Kind of restores your faith in human nature, doesn't it?"

"Yeah," said Nick. "So what needs doing?"

"There are a squillion faxes to go through," said Natalie. "But I can't stay and do any more. Two more clients just checked in back at the motel. I'll have to get back to work, guys.'

"Okay," said Alex. "You've been great."

"Believe me, it was my pleasure."

"I'll walk you to your car," said Nick. "The vultures are in a feeding frenzy out there."

"I'll get my coat and bag."

In the car park, Natalie said, "Have you heard anything? Has he tried to contact you? Made any moves?"

Nick shook his head. "No. I've tried finding him myself, but —"

"How?" said Natalie. "You can't fly in daylight."

His expression was strained. "There's a ... bond. A connection."

Despite everything, she was intrigued. "Nick, you're talking about telepathy."

"No. It's deeper than that. We're —" His hands hovered indecisively. "Tied."

"And it really works?"

"If he wants it to. He can hide his mind."

"From you?" He nodded. "Then hide yours from him, Nick. Make it impossible for him to find you."

His laughter was soft, and bitter. "I can't. Like a lot of things, he never taught me how. That would have made us equals."

"Well ... maybe he's changed his mind."

"No. He's playing games. All I can do is stay alert." He brightened. "The only good news is that for some reason Alex has decided to take my advice and drop the acquaintanceship. You, uh, wouldn't know anything about that, I suppose?"

For the second time that night, she wouldn't meet his eyes. "Alex is a sensible person. He probably just decided to trust your instincts."

He considered her thoughtfully. Her smile was spuriously bright. "I have to get going, Nick. Call me later. Okay?"

"Okay," he said. And watched her drive away without waving out of the window, like she normally did.

Loving her wasn't enough. Words without deeds were worse than empty. They were dishonest. Deceitful. So he'd never said them. Tried to show her, the only way he knew how. See Nat? I love you so much I'll never tell you. I'll never touch you. I'll sign your birthday cards 'with affection' and I'll give you flowers, instead of kisses.

How could he explain to her, when he scarcely understood it himself, that the mortality for which he daily yearned terrified him? That he feared becoming ordinary. Diminished. Feared love and loss in a single span, the infirmities of old age, the ravages of senility, the indignity of pain?

Death, and the reckoning that lay beyond it.

As he was, he had nothing to offer her. He could not conceive of being anything other than what he was.

She would be better off with Alex. Alex could give her love. Warmth. Children. A life in the sun. Alex, for all his human frailties, human flaws, did not strike an echo from the still, deep, dark places of her soul.

With Alex, she'd be safe.

See Nat? I love you so much, I'm letting you go.

A deed without words.

Dallas McMurtry was apprehended by Rochester PD officers at four fifty two a.m on the seventeenth of September, in a warehouse converted into a cheap film studio, on the outskirts of Rochester. Also taken into custody were three of his colleagues. Confiscated from the premises were two truckloads of evidence, including boxes and boxes of video cassettes.

The Harris family was flown to Rochester to participate in a line up identification. Both Susan and Eric Harris separately and correctly selected McMurtry from a carefully chosen group of physically impaired 'suspects'.

In subsequent bartering sessions Hank Richards, one of the colleagues, volunteered to turn Queen's evidence in return for immunity. Billy, who'd always been one can short of a six pack, had been the one who dumped the bodies back in Canada. Dallas had just about killed him, when he found out. Dallas shoulda known better than to trust Billy with anything important. He, Hank, had worked with Dallas most of his life. Dallas shoulda trusted him.

The twenty six master tapes were sent to Toronto. Photographs were made of the less distressing portions, and shown to the families of the murdered children. All confirmed yes, that is a photo of my son, my daughter, my grandchild. And wept.

Stonetree called Natalie into his office. "Have a seat, Dr Lambert. How's things down at the morgue?"

"A laugh a minute," said Natalie.

Stonetree nodded, and doodled on his blotter. Drew a star of David without lifting pen from paper.

Natalie said, "You should be pleased. This is one case that needed solving."

"Oh, yeah," said Stonetree. "I'm pleased."

"Although ... it is all kind of anti-climactic, isn't it? Not being there to make the arrest ourselves. It's like someone forgetting the punch line."

"Yeah," said Stonetree, doodling with intense concentration. "It's a bit like that."

"What's the latest on the extradition?"

"Hearings's scheduled for next month. He's got himself a crack lawyer. Got *lots* of money, has McMurtry. God knows how long it'll be before we can get him to trial. We'll get the nod to bring him across the border, but —"

"He'll appeal it," said Natalie. "Of course."

"Of course. But in the mean time, we have to get ready for the hearing. We have to present our case for extradition. The Crown Prosecutor wants you to give evidence." He stopped doodling. Gave her a very straight look. "She wants you to see the films we confiscated from McMurtry's operation."

"Oh," said Natalie.

"Not just you. Others, as well. But she wants to hammer home the physical stuff. Wants the court to be left in no doubt as to what was done to those kids."

"Lucky court," said Natalie. "When?"

"This evening. Here. Eight o'clock."

"This evening? Oh. Of course. Nick. " She stood. "I'll see you tonight, then."

"I'm sorry, Natalie. I wish there was a way around it, but there isn't."

"The concern's appreciated, Captain, but I knew what I was getting into when I took the job."

Stonetree grunted. "Nobody ever really knows what they're getting into, Doctor. They only think they do."

Driving back to her lab, Natalie smiled, unamused.

Wasn't that just the truth.

In the end there were eleven of them squashed into the largest interview room, seated in front of a tv and video.

"All right," said Dwayne Prescott. "Let's get this over with."

There were five films, each running for about half an hour. The second one featured Tammy McCartney, whose body had never been found. The family had buried a small, empty white coffin two days previously. Billy couldn't seem to remember where he'd dumped her.

The silence after the last video ended was profound. Eventually, Prescott stirred. "Thank you, people. That will be all. Joe, I'd appreciate it if you could spare me a minute. You too, Ms Summers."

Stonetree nodded. "I'll be right with you. There's coffee in my office." They left.

The room had emptied swiftly, save for Nick, Alex and Natalie. The two men hovered beside her, one on each side, not touching her. Just flanking her, like dobermans. Although his face was stiff, like plaster of paris, Stonetree smiled. Very briefly.

"I'm sorry I had to ask you to watch that," he said. "All of you. I've told the department counsellor about this case. If you need someone to talk to, just give her a call. Don't feel ashamed, or that it will reflect adversely on your records. I'll be giving her a call myself. Knight, Haid, you've got the next three days off, starting right now. Take them. I don't want to see you in here again before Friday. I'll be recommending the same to your boss, Dr Lambert. Get some distance between yourselves and what you've seen. Find a way to deal with it before the trial, whenever it's going to be. The fat lady hasn't sung yet, people, I'm sorry to say."

They nodded, without looking at each other. He left them to join Prescott and the Crown Prosecutor.

Nick said, "Use the next few days to get your heads straight. Stonetree's right. This is going to get harder before it gets easier."

"What about you?" said Alex. "Aren't you going to see her? Or didn't any of that bother you?"

"It bothered me," Nick said softly.

"Really?" said Alex. "Funny. You don't look -- bothered -- at at all."

"Alex," said Natalie, and put her hand on his arm. "Please don't."

Alex turned away.

She said, "Look. Why don't we go out for a drink, or something?"

He turned back to her then, and touched her cheek. "No. I need to be alone. Unless --"

She shook her head. "I think I'd like to be alone for a while too. Are you sure you'll be all right?"

Nick said, "I think Nat's right. Maybe we should go somewhere. I don't think being alone --"

"I said no," Alex said curtly. Not looking at Nick. He rested his hand on Natalie's shoulder. "Come on. I'll walk you to your car."

"Okay," she agreed. Looked at Nick. "Stay in touch. Call me if you catch up with that friend of yours."

"I will," Nick promised.

"This friend wouldn't be a mutual acquaintance by any chance?" said Alex, as Natalie let the engine idle.

"How did you guess?" Sitting behind the wheel with the driver's door still open, she played with the key ring dangling from the ignition. Watched the gaudy bauble, a bad taste present from Richard two

Christmases ago, spin and spit fractured light from the overhead street lamp. "Have you heard from him?"

Alex crouched beside her, one hand on the back of the driver's seat for balance. "Yeah. Twice yesterday and another message today. I haven't returned any of them."

"Nick's still looking."

"How hard?"

She closed her eyes. "Please, Alex."

"Sorry."

"I don't think you should be alone right now," she said. "Not just because of LaCroix."

He took her hand, and folded his fingers about it. "I'm okay. I am. And as for LaCroix, I've got Rogan and Nick keeping an eye on me. You said so yourself. Don't worry."

"How can I not worry?" she demanded. She bit her lip, hard. "Alex. The case is solved. Leave. Go somewhere LaCroix will never find you, until this is over."

He stared at the oil stained asphalt. "Will you come with me?"

He felt her stiffen. "You know I can't," she whispered. And slid her hand free.

The night smelt of petrol, and rain, and jasmine. Overhead, a few stars glimmered faintly.

"I'm sorry," she said.

He stood in the car park for some time after she left, oblivious to the comings and goings of uniforms and plain clothes, hookers, suspects and victims

"Alex?"

Nick.

"You okay? Where's Nat?"

"She left."

Nick halted a few paces away. "Would you like to go somewhere? Talk?"

Alex looked at him. "No."

Nick came another step closer. "You sure?"

He'd watched Nick watch the videos. Waited for some kind of reaction, some sign, that these were the worst things he'd ever seen.

Nothing.

No anger. No shock. No revulsion. No pity. No horror. No grief. In eight centuries, then, what had he seen? What had he *done* ?

Nausea washed through him.

Had he killed *children* ?

"Alex?" said Nick, and moved closer, hand outstretched.

"*Don't touch me,*" said Alex.

Nick stopped. Waited. His expression was resigned.

Alex pulled his car keys from his pocket. "I'm going home."

"Yeah," said Nick. "Good idea."

But sitting in his car, letting the engine idle, he hesitated. He didn't want home. Or at least, not yet. He needed a distraction. Something to fill his head with sounds not born of suffering. The Raven? But LaCroix might be there. Not a good move.

The Nook. He'd go and play some music. Exorcise the demons that way.

Mick Rogan was still with him. He must be costing Nick an absolute fortune. But he'd have money, surely, after eight centuries of playing the stock markets, or investing, or even just saving. Right now he didn't care if Nick bankrupted himself on private eyes.

He let himself in to the club. Turned off the alarm system. Switched on the stage light and sat at the baby grand. The room stretched out peacefully all round him, somnolent in shadow. With no sounds, no people, to distract him, he closed his eyes and let the silence soak into him.

Molly, he thought. Her name burst the damn of grief inside him. Tears welled, spilled. Sundered on the rock that had shattered his faith once before. He barred his fingers across his face.

Suffer the little children to come to me. If you loved them, why didn't you save them? Why didn't you stop it? *Why?*

No answer came. He wasn't surprised. It hadn't come six years ago, either.

He lowered his hands. They came to rest on the piano keys before him: a chord in C minor hummed into the corners of the room. A breath caught in the back of his throat, and he choked a little. Cleared his throat.

He began to play. Slowly at first, striking the wrong note every now and then because his hands were shaking and his vision was still blurred. Then more quickly, as rage rose within him, scouring the grief hollowed places within.

He dressed his fury in Chopin's Etude in C Minor. The Revolutionary. Blasted the empty room around him in a storm of sound. Railed against God, against fate, against the bitter filth of everything depraved and wicked and unclean.

The chords thundered to the rafters. The floor beneath his feet vibrated. His bones vibrated. The pain was a flood now. He let it sweep him away.

On the roof of the building Nick listened to the furious outpouring of Alex's anguish. Frederic's 'Revolutionary' crashed to a close. Next came his Fantasy Impromptu. He could feel Alex's passionate agony from here.

Once he, too, had been able to express his pain in angry music. A long time ago. Now he was too tired. Too numb.

Fight, Natalie said. Believe in yourself.

But he didn't have anything left to fight with.

A shaky self respect. The refusal to surrender. Were they all that remained, now? Was it all he could ever hope for? No peace. No happiness. No freedom.

And hardest of all to bear ... the knowledge that despite it all, despite the pain and the fear and the years of struggle that had left him empty and broken ... despite what yet would come to pass ...

He was glad LaCroix wasn't dead.

Alex was still playing. An unfamiliar piece now. Nick pushed his hands deep into the pockets of his overcoat and listened. He'd thought they could be friends. Good friends. He'd committed himself to the idea. Now Alex was threatening his relationsnhip with Natalie.

And his relationship with Natalie was threatening Alex. He trusted Nat with his life. How could he not trust her judgement? She was convinced that Alex wouldn't betray him. Telling Alex might be the only way to save him from LaCroix.

If anything happens to Alex I will never forgive you. Never.

Could he face the future without her? Even from a distance?

He didn't think so.

If he was going to do it ... if he was going to ignore the voice of reason, of caution, of experience, it would have to be now, before he changed his --.

Out of the night came a scream, shrill and shocking. Cutting through the thundering piano below, and the muted babble of mortality surrounding him. He spun about, searching for the source of the cry. It came again, an agonised shriek of pain, of terror.

"Help! Oh God, somebody help me! Stay away! Please! Help!"

It was close. He hesitated, listening. The woman screamed again. No one was coming to her aid. She was sobbing with fear, now.

He couldn't ignore her. He launched himself off the roof.

As the music's echoes died Alex slumped over the keys, exhausted. Purged.

There came the sound of two hands, clapping.

"Bravo," said a familiar voice. "What a virtuoso performance. I *am* impressed."

Alex straightened. Swivelled about on the piano bench until he could see who was behind him. Even though he knew who it was.

"I think you missed your calling, Alex," LaCroix said reprovingly. "Carnegie Hall would weep to know what it has lost to the boys in blue."

He was dressed all in black, as was usual. The pale brown hair was still short, still spiky. The pale blue eyes were maliciously amused.

He said, "You've been avoiding me, Alex. I think my feelings are hurt."

"I've been busy," said Alex. "I was going to call you tomorrow."

"Busy practising? It certainly sounds like it.

"No. We've solved those child murders."

"Child murders?" LaCroix frowned lightly. "Oh, yes. I do recall you mentioned some such thing. Solved them, you say? How satisfying for you."

Alex swallowed. This ... thing ... was not human. He was two thousand years old, older, and a vampire. He had some weird, sick hold over Nick. He intended, Alex was sure now, to hurt Nick through him.

How could he have been so blind?

The smile faded from LaCroix's face. The light in his eyes seemed to flare red.

"Well, well, well," he said softly. Alex felt the hair rise on the back of his neck. "It would appear that our Nicholas has been talking out of turn. How very ... unwise ... of him." And added, as Alex took a deep breath, "Don't bother. There's no one to hear your pitiful cries for help. Nicholas was keeping a touching vigil, but I'm afraid he's been called away on business. His streak of chivalry -- he just can't seem to overcome it. Early conditioning, you know."

He stood. "Stay away from me."

LaCroix smiled. He had fangs. His eyes were no longer blue. "I don't think so," he replied.

Alex's hand came up. Snapped the crucifix from its chain, and held the cross before him.

"I said, stay away from me. Get behind me, Satan."

LaCroix hissed, cringing. His arm flew up to protect his face. Alex stepped forward, and gestured with the crucifix.

"Go! In Jesus' name, go!"

Faster than his eye could follow the movement, LaCroix was on the stage before him. The crucifix was struck from his hand, and his arm went numb to the shoulder.

LaCroix was laughing. "*Get behind me, Satan*?" he repeated incredulously. "Even Nicholas didn't try that one." Mirth convulsed him. "Oh, Alex, Alex, that was really very funny." He sat on the piano bench and roared. Alex stared, incapable of moving. Responding. LaCroix's laughter descended into chuckles. Little hiccups. "Mind you," he said, "at least Jesus and I have something in common now. Although, by all accounts, his resurrection was greeted with far more rapture than mine. A matter for some distress, as I'm sure you can appreciate. How sharper than a serpent's tooth, etcetera, etcetera."

Still Alex could not reply. Mute with fear he could only stand, and stare. If Nick was evil, then this -- this creature could make you believe that hell was neither metaphysical nor allegorical. That it existed. And that he knew it. Intimately. He tried to pray but the words would not come, even in his mind.

LaCroix's cold finger touched his cheek. He couldn't breathe. When had the vampire moved? He was before him now, inspecting his face with clinical interest.

"Do you know," LaCroix murmured, "I hadn't actually intended harming one pretty blond hair on your head. It was enough that Nicholas thought I would. But now ... seeing as how he's been so indiscreet ... a matter of two birds with one stone, you could say? Hmmm?"

"Please ..." Alex managed to whisper.

LaCroix's smile was seraphic. "Certainly," he said. "Since you ask so nicely."

The pain in his neck was excruciating.

The last thing he heard was LaCroix. Drinking.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

By the time he found her, the woman was dead. Strangled. There was no sign of the killer, or killers. Nick sagged against a wall in the deserted back alley and looked at the victim. Another statistic. He groped for his phone. He couldn't afford to get involved in this, he had to get back to Alex. He called it in as an anonymous tip and flew back to the The Nook. All in all, it had taken just under a quarter of an hour.

Landing lightly on the roof of the building he extended his senses. The piano was silent. And he couldn't hear Alex's heart beat inside the building.

No.

He broke in through one of the street level windows around the back. The stage was lit. Deserted. Beneath the baby grand's piano stool he found a crucifix on a snapped chain.

Alex.

Hovering high above the street again, he looked at Alex's car, still sitting where he'd left it. Maybe he'd just gone for a walk, then. Maybe he'd pulled off the crucifix in a passion of anger. Managed somehow to give the investigator the slip.

Of course not.

He decided to leave Rogan in place, just in case this was a false alarm. In case Alex came back to collect his car and drive safely home. Then he took to the air, searching.

Nothing.

He tried phoning Alex's place. No answer. Natalie had heranswering machine on, wasn't picking up her calls. Maybe he'd gone around there. It was a long walk, but if he was upset, maybe he hadn't noticed.

He flew to Natalie's.

She was home. One look at his face sapped her own of colour. "What? What's happened?"

He stood adrift in the middle of her loungeroom.and couldn't meet her eyes.

"Alex is missing."

"Missing?" she said faintly. "What do you mean, missing?"

"Gone. Disappeared."

"Oh my God," she said. "When was the last time you saw him?"

"Tonight. I followed him to The Nook. He went in. He started to play the piano. There was a woman. I heard her screaming. I couldn't ignore it, I went to help but I was too late. When I got back to the club, Alex was gone."

Her face was stark. "LaCroix."

"Yes. No. I don't know," said Nick.

"If he'd been there, would you have known?"

He wanted to say, yes. But it would be a lie. How many times in his life had he looked up to find LaCroix before him, and never suspected for a moment that he was close?

"I didn't think so," said Natalie, and collected her coat, and bag, and car keys

"Where are you going?" he said.

"We are going to The Raven," Natalie said grimly. "And you are going to make Janette tell you where LaCroix is. Pull out all her fingernails one by one, if you have to. I'll play scrub nurse and pass you the pliers."

"Natalie, she won't tell me. She's made her position clear."

"Then I suggest you reclarify it for her," said Natalie. "Shall we go?"

Janette wasn't at The Raven.

"Where is she, then?" said Natalie, as Nick got back into the car.

"I don't know. Alma doesn't know, either. She says Janette said she had some business to take care of, put her in charge, and left."

"Did she fly or drive?

"I didn't ask."

"Alma could be lying."

Nick shook his head. "She wouldn't dare."

"Great!" Natalie punched the steering wheel. "Now what?"

"I'll try calling his place again." There was no reply. "Damn. Wait. Schanke!"

Natalie stared. "What about him?"

"He and Alex get on pretty well. And Schanke knows better than anyone what we've gone through on the McMurtry case. Alex could have gone there."

"On foot?"

"I don't know."

Natalie shook the steering wheel. "Nick, you're grasping at straws. We both know what's happened. LaCroix killed that woman, or got someone else to kill her, knowing you were there. Knowing you'd leave Alex alone, to help her."

He couldn't look at her. "Yes."

"He'll take every vestige of your humanity and turn it into a weapon, won't he? Every good thought, every honourable impulse, every honest emotion, and use it to hurt you."

He was frozen through. "Yes."

She was crying. "Then how can you beat him? If you do nothing, he wins. If you use his weapons, he wins. How can you beat him?"

"I don't know," he whispered.

Still, she wouldn't look at him. "Find him, Nick. And find Alex. Bring him back."

He got out of the car and watched her drive away. After she'd turned the corner, and was out of sight, he took to the air.

For what remained of the night he circled the city again and again, searching, listening, looking. Went further than the city, to the outskirts, the suburbs, the fringes. Still nothing. Circled in again, lower than was wise, or safe, and stretched his mind to breaking point.

LaCroix, LaCroix, here I am. Come and get me.

Even as he called he knew it was futile. LaCroix would reply when it suited him, and not before. He was wasting his time and his energy, risking discovery, courting disaster, and even as he did it he knew it was for nothing.

But to go home was to admit defeat. To passively accept LaCroix's mastery of the situation.

Of him.

Anathema.

He tried searching for Alex, instead. Alex was mortal, he couldn't hide from him.

Nothing.

He was dangerously tired. Dawn was close. He could feel it, the merest frisson of fear in the back of his mind. He had to stop, now, or risk falling out of the sky from exhaustion, or not making it home before the light.

Stumbling into the loft, he went first to the answering machine. No messages. He called The Raven. Janette still wasn't back. Called Rogan, and cancelled the surveillance. Called Natalie.

"Nothing," she said tersely. "You?"

"No."

Deadly silence, filled with all the things he knew she was making herself not say.

"Nat ... I have to sleep. As soon as the sun goes down I'll start looking again."

"All right."

He fell face down across his bed, fully clothed, an almost empty bottle in his hand. When he woke, twelve hours later, he hadn't moved from that position. Groaning, feeling the weight of every year, every day, of his life pressing down on him, he headed for the shower. Felt no better in fresh clothes, with a full bottle, drained to the dregs, inside him.

The only message on the machine was from Schanke. He hadn't seen Alex. Did Nick want to go bowling, or something? Call and let him know. Hasta la bye bye. He called Natalie, but she wasn't at home, or wasn't answering. She wasn't at work, either. Alex's phone rang out.

He smashed the empty bottle against the wall.

Reached out with his mind.

All right. You win. Where are you?

It was the resounding silence that tipped him into a rage he had released only a handful of times in his life. A rage born of his blind, unreasoning hatred for all things unjust. A rage that thirsted for slaughter, for vengeance, for bloody retribution. No mortal had ever survived it. It terrified even Janette, whose anger could be formidable in itself. Had earned him LaCroix's genuine admiration.

Burning, he flew all night, and as the hours dragged on, and his repeated calls were steadfastly ignored, so did his rage feed upon itself, and grow, until once more he was truly less than human.

An hour before dawn he passed yet again above The Raven. This time, he checked in mid air. Hovered, his eyes luminescent.

Janette had returned.

He had passed far beyond the polite usage of a door.

"*Nicola!*" Janette screamed, as her office window imploded. "What are you doing? Get out!"

He brushed broken glass from his sleeves. Stepped forward, crushing it under foot. "Where is he, Janette?"

One look at his face, the sound of his terribly altered voice, and she had her desk between them.

"Get out," she said again. "You know I cannot tell you."

"You can, and you will."

Her eyes were gold, her fangs extended. "Stay away from me. None of this is my fault. Do you think I would risk his wrath for a mortal?"

"Will you risk mine, for him?"

It wasn't safe to take her eyes off him, not for a mortal heart beat. Her fingers searched the top of the desk. Closed about a cold, hard sphere: her marble paperweight.

"I'm warning you," she said.

"The warning is all mine," he told her softly. "Refuse me, and I promise you will regret it."

One foot in front of the other, he reduced the distance between them.

As hard as she could, she threw the paperweight at him. He plucked it from the air. Closed his fist about it, and let the dust drift between his fingers.

"I ask you for the last time: where is he?"

She shook her head. He opened his fingers. Fragments of crushed rock thudded to the carpet. Janette looked at them. Looked at him.

Again, she shook her head.

He had her by the throat before she could move. Drove her against the wall, lips drawn back. His pupils were mere pinpricks, his anger beating at her from blind eyes. He exhaled, a long, sibilant hiss of fury.

She knew, then, what he intended to do.

"*Nicola. Non. Non, je tu supplie.*"

He sank his fangs into her flesh. Drank deeply, brutally. At length he opened his eyes, and looked at her. Two thin threads of scarlet trickled over her collarbone. Limply she dangled from his fist.

"407 Amber Drive, Cedar Grove" he said. "Thank you."

Her eyes were black pits. "I hate you," she whispered.

He kissed her.

"Not as much as I hate you," he said. And left.

The eastern sky was lightening. It made no difference. He flew fast and high, following the mental road map he had taken from Janette. She had been with LaCroix. She hadn't seen Alex. She didn't know if he were alive or dead, but she thought dead. So did he.

Half way there, it came. Like the solitary, sonorous toll of a bell. Like one ringing blow of hammer to anvil. A single sword thrust to the heart.

Nicholas.

Gathering the shreds and tatters of his strength about him, he flew faster.

407 Amber Drive was, as he'd expected it to be, in an outlying Toronto suburb. He landed heavily by the front steps, and staggered a pace or two before recovering his balance.

The brief spurt of energy from Janette's blood was spent. He was so tired. The rage had almost expired, dying slowly of cancerous fear.

He knew what was coming.

Raising both fists high above his head, he brought them down against the weathered front door. It splintered off its hinges and dangled drunkenly to one side.

"LaCroix!" he bellowed, stepping through into the hallway. "LaCroix, face me!"

Nothing. He stood still and listened for the swift tripping of a human heart. The house was silent, save for the ticking of a clock somewhere upstairs.

He roamed the ground floor, knocking door after door flat to the carpet. Kitchen, bathroom, lounge room, dining room: all were empty, filled with nothing but shrouded furniture and dust.

Too weary now to fly the stairs, still he took them three at a time and began to ransack the upper storey.

Alex was behind the third door. He was seated at a desk, writing something. As the door crashed open he looked up.

"Nick," he said, and completed his final sentence. Signed his name, folded the paper and put it in an envelope. Wrote something on it, and set it to one side, on top of two other envelopes.

Nick stood just inside the open door way. Stared in silence for a moment then realised, appalled, that Alex was looking straight into his altered face. He ducked his head, turning half away, and with difficulty willed the beast into submission.

Alex said, "Please don't bother. Not on my account."

His eyes were greeny gold, and his fangs were sharp.

Nick said, "No," but no sound escaped his lips.

"Don't tell me you're surprised?" said Alex.

After all this time, he shouldn't be. But there was something within him which closed his eyes. Wouldn't let him see what was coming. Refused to allow him to anticipate the inevitable.

If he believed there was truly no hope ... if he for one moment accepted that LaCroix would always win ... there would be no reason not to use LaCroix's own weapons against him.

Then the humanity he had fought so hard to keep, had paid such prices to preserve, would be destroyed.

And he would be utterly lost.

Alex got up from the desk. Moved to a maple drinks cabinet that stood against the wall next to the velvet shrouded windows, and opened it. He glanced over his shoulder. Once more, his face was human.

"You look exhausted. And hungry." Opening the cabinet he uncorked a bottle and filled two glasses. Carried them over to Nick, and held one out to him. "LaCroix said you'd come."

Nick stared at the glass.

Alex said, "Oh, you needn't worry. It's cow. I understand you don't drink anything else? He finds that very amusing, by the way."

The hunger could not be denied, could never be satisfied. Nick accepted the glass, held it, as Alex cautiously sipped his own.

"It's all right, I suppose," he said, considering. "A bit like spumante after vintage champagne, but bearable." He held up his glass in a salute. "Shall we drink a toast? To us? After all, we're ... now how did LaCroix put it? Yes. Blood brothers. We're blood brothers, now." He smiled. "I always wanted a brother."

Nick drained the glass. Alex refilled it with the rest of the blood from the bottle. "You might as well finish it," he said. "No point letting it go to waste. Drink up, Nick. You look like you need it. I'm afraid I'm not very hungry just now." He put his own glass, largely untouched, safely to one side.

Nick drank again, then put the empty glass on the table, next to Alex's.

Alex said, "You cut it pretty fine, getting here. It's nearly daylight." He fiddled with the button on his shirt cuff. "Funny, how I know that without even opening the curtains. It's a strange sensation, isn't it? Like a tickle in the back of your mind. Not completely pleasant. But then ... sunlight isn't, is it? Not any more."

He moved to one of two overstuffed leather arm chairs placed companionably before an empty open fire place, and sat down.

"The reason I'm not hungry," he said, "is because I've already ... fed. LaCroix found someone. Someone unimportant, that no one would miss."

Nick took a step towards him, then stopped. There was a pain in him, greater than his power to endure. "Alex ..."

Alex continued, "I didn't care. I woke, and I was hungry. I've never felt anything like that before. All I could think of was the blood. How I wanted it. Needed it. I could hear it in his veins. I could actually smell it. The fact that I was going to kill him to get it ... didn't matter. But you know all about that. Don't you."

Nick nodded. "Yes. I know all about that." His voice was faint. He felt fragile. As though any ill considered movement would shatter him.

Alex sat back, elbows braced on the arms of the chair, his fingers interlaced. "Mmm. So I fed. And then he showed me how to break the neck, just to be sure. Not everybody gets to be a vampire, after all. Only special people."

"Where is he?" Nick asked.

Alex shrugged. "I don't know."

Suddenly it was too hard to remain standing. He moved, like a mortal with rheumatism, to the other leather arm chair. Sat down, and made himself look at Alex. Self loathing choked him.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

Alex nodded slowly and lowered his hands to his lap. "I know."

The dreadful silence dragged on. It was Alex who broke it.

"I'm curious," he said. "If you knew my life was in danger from LaCroix, why didn't you tell me the truth? Why did you stay silent?"

Nick rested his fist against his lips. Took the flesh over his knuckles between his teeth and bit until he tasted blood.

"I was afraid," he admitted at last. Not looking at Alex.

"Of what? That I'd tell? Run to Stonetree and say, don't look now but your blue eyed boy is a blood sucking monster? Destroy the fiction of your life, and force you into hiding?"

Nick nodded. Shame was hot and bright and it burnt as mercilessly as sunlight.

Brutally Alex said, "Well, you were right. I would have. You're a murderer, Nick. And we both know how I feel about murderers."

Nick lowered his bloody hand. Stared. "Alex ..."

"And then what would you have done? Killed me? Killed everyone I told?"

"No," said Nick. "Never."

Alex regarded him curiously. "I believe you. In your own way I think you are ... a good man. So what else could you have done? Brainwashed me? I think you tried that, once. It didn't work. I'm a stubborn son of a bitch. You should know that by now. I won't be told. I go my own way." He smiled. "Pride. Brother Andrew always said it'd get me into trouble one day."

"I should have trusted you," Nick said, low voiced.

"Why?" said Alex. "Trust is earned."

Nick shook his head. "If you'd known the truth, this wouldn't have happened."

"No" said Alex. "It's *because* I knew that this happened."

The clock on the mantlepiece ticked into the silence. Nick said, "Natalie told you?"

"Yes."

"And that's why LaCroix --"

Alex leaned forward, face vivid with intensity. "She must never know."

Beneath his hands, the arms of the chair creaked protestingly. "She told you."

"Only because she had no choice," Alex said swiftly. "You musn't think it was easy for her. It wasn't. But I picked up the tail, Nick. She was with me. She told me who he was to stop me shoving my gun up his nose. And she told me about you because I was going to shove my gun up your nose. In public. But before she said anything, she made me swear to stay silent. So you've got her to thank for your secret staying safe. I'd never go back on my word to Natalie."

Nick said, "Mick Rogan's an experienced investigator. Picking him up makes you a good cop."

"Yes," said Alex. "I was good, wasn't I?"

Nick's head snapped up. "You can still be good, Alex. I know this isn't what you wanted, but you can still have a life. It'll be different, but it can be done. I've done it."

"Yes," said Alex. "You have. And look how happy it makes you." His face twisted with baffled anger. "God, Nick. *Why?* How could you have chosen this willingly? What made you do it?"

He pushed himself out of the arm chair. It had all been so long ago. He never thought about why, any more. Why didn't matter. Standing beside a dusty book case crammed with leatherbound classics, he said, "Is it important?"

"I'd like to know."

He closed his eyes, remembering. Spoke softly. "I was a knight, sworn to defend the faith. I wanted to free Christendom from the scourge of the infidel. The Church said that the killing of Muslims was pleasing to God. That our cause was just, and holy, and glorious. I thought I was blessed."

Even now, the memory had the power to gall him. It soured his mouth, clenched his hands into fists.

"But?" said Alex.

With some effort he uncurled his fingers. Laid them flat to the bookshelves before him.

"But the siege of Damietta wasn't glorious. The killing of innocent men wasn't just. And I don't think God would call the spitting of babies on pikes a holy act." He shuddered. *The screaming and the wailing and the greasy black smoke in the blue, blue sky.* "Damietta was a disaster. Four years of killing. Dying. And in the end, it was all for nothing."

"Why?"

He leaned his head against the book case. "Because we gave it back."

Alex was silent for a time. Then he said, "And that's where you met LaCroix?"

"No. We abandoned Damietta in 1221. King Frederic took another Crusade back there in 1228, and I went with it."

"You went back?" Alex blinked.

He sighed. "There was a woman, I -- it doesn't matter.She's long dead. I was wounded. I went home. I met LaCroix two months later."

Alex's voice was puzzled. "So you became a vampire because ... why? A failed romance? Because the Crusades weren't what you thought they'd be? Because some misguided men claiming to represent the Church lied to you?"

Nick looked at him. "It was worse than a lie. But no. That wasn't the reason." He smudged his fingers through the dust on the book shelves before him. "Not the real reason." He stared into the distance. "Have you ever heard a human burn to death? Smelt a desert full of corpses? Seen a man cut his own throat rather than watch the gangrene rot the flesh from his bones?"

Tick, tick, tick, went the clock. Meaningless time in a dead house. Alex said nothing.

"I have put my sword through the eye of an enemy and watched the blood gush like a river in flood," said Nick. "Split him like a carcase from neck to groin and tripped in his entrails as I hacked the head from his companion. Butchered towns. Slaughtered villages."

Allah save us, Allah preserve us they cried as they went down before him like wheat before the scythe. Behold the mighty arm of God ...

"I have felt forged steel open me like a sheep and bare my bones to the sky. Lain screaming in my own blood and sweat and filth as my friends died in agony all around me, and listened to the priests tell us that death in the service of the Lord was a gift from Heaven."

"Ah," said Alex, on a gentle, unnecessary exhalation. "So when LaCroix offered you immortality ..."

"I thought it was a miracle."

"And you never once asked the price?"

"I thought it was free."

"Oh, Nick."

He turned away. "How you must hate me."

Alex inspected his finger nails for a moment. Then he looked up. "I did." He sat quietly for a moment, staring at the windows. "Natalie says you're trying to come back across?"

Yes," said Nick.

"Is it working?"

"I ... I don't know."

Alex looked at him. "Come on, Nick. You must have some idea. Are you any more human now than you were, say, a year ago? A decade? A century?"

"I think I am."

"You're more sorry, perhaps. I'm not sure it's the same thing. Are you more *human*?"

"I can hold a cross now, without bursting into flames. I can keep down a little raw steak. I can go outside in daylight, if I cover up. If I'm careful."

"And if you're not?"

Nick looked down. "I burn."

"You burn," Alex repeated. "So tell me, Nick. Despite all your best efforts, despite everything that Natalie has ever done for you ... are you any more human?"

"I don't know," Nick said.

Alex's voice was gentle. "I think you do."

Nick said nothing. There was nothing to say.

"You're expecting a lot of her, you know. Have you ever stopped to ask yourself if it's fair?"

"A thousand times."

"And a thousand times you know the answer is no. But it hasn't stopped you, has it?"

"You don't understand," said Nick. "You're only at the beginning. She is the only hope I have. She is the only one who has ever tried to change this."

Alex said roughly, "She's in love with you. There's nothing she wouldn't do for you ... including wasting her life waiting for you to become human again. How long have you been trying, Nick? How many people have been born, grown up, grown old and died while you scrabbled about for a way back you don't even know for sure exists? Is that what you want for her? Is that your definition of love?"

Nick braced his elbows on the book case and buried his face in his hands. Alex's voice pursued him relentlessly.

"Maybe it is. Maybe it's the only way a vampire *can* love. Take and take and take. Suck the heart out of the poor fool who's fallen for you, and when they're nothing but a dry husk toss them aside, and go on to the next one. I guess after eight hundred years you must have gotten it down to a fine art."

"No!" said Nick, and turned on him.

Alex didn't flinch, or cower. "No? What, then? How would you describe what you're doing to her?"

Nick swallowed. Blinked away the green gold haze. "You don't understand," he said again, tiredly.

"Yes, I do. She's your talisman. Your last hope for humanity. The question is ... what are you, for her?"

"I don't really know," Nick whispered. "I've never asked her. All I know is that I'm very careful. I've never kissed her. Never touched her."

"And do you imagine that gives her cause for joy?"

A long silence. Alex stared at the carpet. Eventually he looked up and said, "I don't hate you, Nick. I hate what you are. What we are. What we've done, because of it. If you're a murderer, then so am I."

Nick took one step towards him and stopped as Alex raised a hand.

"Let me finish. I owe you an apology. I had no idea. I thought you could have stopped yourself, if you really wanted to. But I ... couldn't stop." He paused, struggling for control. "I didn't *want* to stop. I wanted to take every last drop from that man LaCroix brought me. And I did. And it was ... sublime."

"I know."

"And when the hunger comes upon me again, I'll take another life to satisfy it. And another. And another. And another ..."

The anguish in his face was scalpel sharp. Nick said, "Alex, it doesn't have to be like that. I stopped feeding from humans more than a century ago."

"How?" cried Alex. "How did you stop yourself? How do you control it? The hunger -- it's overwhelming -- it's --"

Nick crossed to the chair opposite Alex and sat. "It's hard, but it's not impossible. I'll help you. We don't need human blood. Cow's not so bad. You get used to it."

"Used to it," Alex whispered. "Does that mean you've lost the taste for human, then? Does the thought no longer interest you? Does your throat no longer ache to feel the thick, salty, iron rush of it? The sweetness and the splendour?"

No, howls the beast.

"Yes," said Nick.

"Be honest," said Alex. "Honesty is all that we have, now." He attempted a smile. "Tell me. Please," he said. "And tell me the truth. Does it get any easier? Do you ever stop wanting the blood? Can you relax, even for a moment, and forget who and what you are?"

Outside the window, an oriole was singing.

"No," said Nick. "Never."

Alex closed his eyes. Sat completely still. Gradually his face altered. Smoothed. When he looked at Nick again, the torment had gone.

He asked, "Do you still believe in God?"

"I believe in the devil," Nick said bitterly.

"So do I," said Alex. "I've met him. Answer the question."

"Yes. I believe in God. I believe He has forsaken me."

Alex stood. Moved to Nick and put a hand on his shoulder. "No. The truth, remember? You forsook Him."

Nick pulled away. "What difference does it make? I've fallen from grace, and there's no way back."

This time Alex's smile was almost like his old, human smile. "You can't really believe that. If you did, you wouldn't suffer the way Natalie says you suffer. You wouldn't be working as a cop, trying to help people. You'd still be with LaCroix."

Nick shook his head. "You don't understand."

"Maybe not. But God does. Christ faced temptation in the desert."

"Christ didn't give in."

"Christ was Christ," said Alex. "Nick. Do you want to be forgiven?"

"It's not possible."

"It is. But first you have to forgive yourself."

Nick stared at him. "How can I do that? Can you? You don't know, Alex. You don't know what I've done. What I could do again, if I yielded to the beast. I am irredeemable."

Slowly, Alex shook his head. "No. No one is irredeemable, Nick. That was *my* sin. To judge you. Condemn you. Put you beyond the grace of God. But only God can do that. He'd rather forgive you."

Nick pushed out of the chair. Rested his forearms along he mantlepiece above the fireplace, and laid his head upon them.

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"'*When the wicked man turneth away from the wickedness that he hath committed, and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul alive*'," Alex said with quiet intensity. "Believe it, Nick. Believe it with all your heart. It's the truth. It's why after eight hundred years you're still trying."

Nick glanced at him, then lowered his head again. "It may be true for you. Not for me. It's too late. It was too late a long time ago. I'm still trying because it's all I have left that is not LaCroix's creation."

"Nick. Look at me."

Slowly Nick lifted his head. Alex was standing in front of the windows. They were large, old fashioned. Stretched from ceiling to floor. Daylight glowed behind their mantle of velvet.

He said, "Don't blame yourself. You did your best to protect me. It isn't your fault that LaCroix is ... LaCroix."

Nick was suddenly afraid. "Alex –"

"Look after Natalie. Do what's best for her, and not for you. Even if it means letting her go, and fighting this battle on your own."

"Alex!" Nick said, pushing away from the mantlepiece. "Alex, don't!"

"'After the first death, there is no other'. Dylan Thomas. I'm sorry, Nick," said Alex. "I can't do it. I'm not strong enough. Not as strong as you. I'll put in a good word for you, I promise." Then he spun on his heel, flung back the crimson curtains and spilled the sunrise all over himself.

"*Alex* !" Nick screamed.

There was a hiss and a belch of smoke. Nick flung his arms in front of his face to hide it from the terrible light. There came a loud roar and a gush of heat as flames licked the air and disappeared.

Fractionally, Nick lowered his arms.

From behind him, LaCroix said, "So. He killed himself. I thought he might."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Nick did not move as LaCroix sauntered past him, to stop on the lip of shadow and stare down at Alex's illuminated clothes and the fine sifting of his ashes. If the sunlight unnerved him, he did not show it.

"I'm not at all surprised you two were friends," he remarked, retreating to hitch his hip onto the corner of the desk. "In many ways you were a lot alike. I never thought I'd hear such pious drivel again. Although I will give you this, Nicholas. You never tried to convert me." He shook with silent amusement. "'Get behind me, Satan.'" He slapped his thigh lightly, then sobered. Sighed. "What, Nicholas? Has the cat got your tongue? Are you to say nothing?"

Dully, staring at the floor, Nick said, "What is there to say?"

LaCroix looked surprised. "Lots, I should imagine. I understand you were under the impression that you'd killed me. Tut, tut. You should have known better."

Nick raised his eyes. "Why?"

Glancing at the clothes, LaCroix shrugged. "It amused me. And besides, he knew about us. A mistake, Nicholas. You should choose your confidantes with more care. Be grateful I didn't just kill him outright. As it stands, I thought I was most magnanimous, giving him a second chance. Death was his choice. Not mine."

Nick's face twisted. He spoke slowly, as though each word taxed the dregs of his strength. "He had no choice. You knew him. You heard his music. Killing was as foreign to his nature as kindness is to yours. You wanted to hurt him. Why? He never hurt you. He was incapable of hurting you."

LaCroix's expression chilled. "He was poaching."

Nick moved, and caught himself. His hands, stilled into fists, shook at his sides. "*You don't own me.*"

One supercilious eyebrow arched. "Don't I?"

With an anguished cry Nick flew at him.

It was like all their physical encounters: short, sharp and savage. Never before had he wanted so much to hurt LaCroix. But he was tired, and hungry, and in despair, and this time there was no fire, no flaming spear, to help him.

Rage alone had never been enough.

LaCroix smashed him to the floor. When he got to his feet, LaCroix threw him across the room. Then into the fire place.

Nick made to rise a fourth time. In a bored tone, belied by his eyes and fangs, LaCroix said, "Do yourself a favour, Nicholas, and just stay there. You're in no shape to fight me, and we both know it. We'll save a lot of time and energy if we take your defeat as read, and hurry the proceedings along. I don't have all day."

Nick got to his feet. Forced himself to meet LaCroix's altered eyes. Made no attempt to disguise his feelings.

Unperturbed, LaCroix resumed his mortal disguise. "Stand then, if it will make you feel better. Now. Moving right along. I have to tell you, that aside from a glimmer of entertainment here and there, I haven't had much fun lately. And that is all your fault. I'm not going to mince words here, Nicholas. I'm not very happy with you."

"Really?" said Nick, with a quirk of a smile and an old, strange calm. "Now there's a news flash."

"Watch your tongue," LaCroix warned.

"Go to hell."

"Isn't that what you said last time? At least try to be original, Nicholas." Clasping his hands behind his back, LaCroix began to pace slowly about the room. "You've hurt me. Deeply. After all that I've done for you, you repay me with violence. With murder."

"Done for me?" Nick demanded. "*Done* for me?"

"Thank you, Nicholas, I am not deaf. One outraged repetition is quite sufficient," LaCroix said crisply. "Yes. Done for you. Must I play twenty questions?" Taking in the set, sullen expression on Nick's face, he sighed. "Clearly, I must. Very well. When the good burghers of Dortmund wanted to burn you at the stake, who dissuaded them?"

Nick laughed. "Dissuaded? You slaughtered half the town."

LaCroix waved a negligent hand. "Thirteen people. Hardly a fifty percent reduction in the population. It's beside the point, anyway. I didn't ask you how much I had to drink that night, I asked you who saved you from the stake?"

"You did."

"Precisely. I did. To continue. When you made a fool of yourself over that French count's tedious daughter, who prevented you from being put in the stocks from dawn to dusk?"

"You did."

"Correct again. When you were playing Florence Nightingale in that insignificant American fracas, who saved you from the Enforcers?"

"You did."

LaCroix clapped his hands together. "By George, I think he's got it. Let's just make sure, shall we? When you returned from your second squalid little crusade to Egypt, scarred, flux ridden, lice infested, sunburned and blistered, disillusioned and defeated and unmanned, who gave you back your manhood? Who gave you physical perfection? Who gave you dominion over mortality? Victory over death? Who gave you the greatest gift it is possible to receive?"

Nick snarled. "Who gave me eight centuries without the sun? Who gave me bloodshed, and murder, and fear in the night? Who made me a parasite, a vampire, an abomination in the eyes of God?"

LaCroix smiled. "You did."

Nick flung himself away. Nearly overbalanced into the bright rectangle of light on the carpet. Hissing, he teetered on the brink. LaCroix's hand pulled him back.

Gently he said, "Let us not forget exactly how it happened, Nicholas. Let us not forget who asked, and who answered."

Nick closed his eyes. Whispered, "I know I was not forced. I know you gave me a choice. What you didn't give me was the truth."

"I gave you all the truth you wanted to hear," LaCroix said. "You wanted to live forever. You wanted to be free of pain and suffering. You wanted to be invincible."

"Yes, I wanted all of those things!" Nick cried. "But not at the cost of innocent lives!"

"And the Muslims who died on the end of your sword? The old men, the young girls, the babes in their mothers' arms? Were they not innocent?" LaCroix smiled. "No. Of course they weren't. They had the temerity not to be born Christians."

Nick shook his head. "You never listen. Why won't you listen? Don't you care, that I find this life intolerable? That what I am appals me? That I cannot find a moment's peace?" He stopped. "Don't you *care* ?"

LaCroix's face was still. "Don't you care," he said, "that you tried to kill me?"

Nick turned away.

"Enough of this," LaCroix said impatiently. "Your weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth grew tiresome five minutes after it began. Shall we turn our attention to the point of this charming little reunion?"

Turning back, Nick said, "I know the point of this. It's always been the same. To hurt me. Congratulations. Now let me go."

LaCroix's eyebrows escalated. "Go? Go where? It's broad daylight. Besides, *mon cher enfant*, I have not yet begun to hurt you."

"What else could you possibly do to cause me pain?" Nick demanded bitterly.

LaCroix laughed. "Why, Nicholas. The mortal life has atrophied your imagination." He watched Nick swallow. Watched the last, lingering remnants of defiance leach from his tense muscles, leaving them unstrung. Helplessness, hopelessness, smoothed the loved, hated face.

A fierce, atavistic joy siezed him. *Yes.* Now the reckoning would be paid. An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth. That ridiculous book of fairy tales got one thing right, at least. Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord.

I am lord here. A thousand pities you ever forgot it.

Quietly, he said, "You raised your hand to me in anger, Nicholas. You attempted my life. You broke the Code."

"You pushed me," Nick protested. "You pushed me, and you pushed me, until I had no choice."

"No choice?" LaCroix demanded. "No *choice* ? Between a mortal and me there is a *choice* ?"

Nick said, "Alyce was innocent."

"She was *irrelevant.* The Code, Nicholas, is quite clear in this matter. One word in the right ear, and your heart will be torn from your chest, your head will be struck from your body and your remains will be tossed to the light. Shall I say the word, Nicholas? Hmm? Or would you rather face my wrath here, and now, and take your chances? The Enforcers might be kinder."

Nick tried to speak. Closed his eyes. Said hoarsely, "I am *not* sorry." A pained, painful pause. "And I am."

"I'm gratified to hear it. But your sorrow, however appropriate, changes nothing. I offer you another choice, Nicholas. Which is it to be?"

Nick lifted his lids. LaCroix's blue eyes were without mercy. He had endured his master's displeasure many times in the past. It had never been pleasant, but neither had it been beyond his ability to survive. Whatever else lay between them, in this LaCroix was correct. He had broken the Code, and could be executed without appeal.

And then there was Alex. He would have to do penance for that. LaCroix's punishment would serve as well as anything he could think of. Better.

"Nicholas ..."

"I choose to stay," Nick replied.

"I was so hoping you'd say that." Retreating a pace or two, LaCroix sat himself on the edge of the desk. Folded his arms across his chest, and lowered his gaze to the carpet. The look in his eyes, when he lifted them once more, dried Nick's mouth to ash.

Gently, caressingly, LaCroix said, "Burning is a terrible thing, Nicholas. Of the few pains we can suffer, the most horrible. No doubt Alex would have had some suitably biblical explanation. I do not know the reason, nor do I particularly care." He inspected his smooth, white hands. Rubbed a speck of dust from the heavy signet ring on his finger. Looked up. "Do you dream, Nicholas?"

Nick nodded. LaCroix's expression was pensive. "Yes. So do I. Of late, my dreams have followed a pyrotechnic theme I find quite distasteful. I never would have thought it, but it seems that our indelible memories can, under certain circumstances, prove disadvantageous."

Nick said, "I could have told you that a long time ago."

LaCroix's eyebrows indicated delicate surprise. "Really? But then, Nicholas, you're still hampered by the inappropriate remnants of a conscience, aren't you? You suffer all the pangs of pity, and mercy, and compassion, and sorrow, and tenderness, and remorse."

His contempt could draw blood. Nick looked away. Looked down, and watched, mesmerised, the approach of the light like an incoming tide across the carpet.

LaCroix nodded. "Ah, yes. The light." He arranged himself more comfortably on the desk. He smiled. "Put your hand in the light, *cher Nicolas.* Put your hand in the light."

Natalie never knew, precisely, what woke her. She opened her eyes in the cool dimness of Nick's bedroom, swaddled in black silk. Blinking, she glanced at the bed side clock. Ten to nine. God, it was so late. Where was he?

Afer waiting in her apartment for hours the previous evening, she couldn't stand it any more. She'd gone to Alex's and waited there until just before dawn. Nothing. So then she'd come here, to Nick's, expecting to find him. The place was empty.

It was empty, and the city was yellow with sunshine.

In the end, despite the gut churning fear, she'd had to sleep. Commandeered his bed, and not only because her back couldn't take sleeping on a narrow couch

Now it was night time. Oh God, oh God. Where was he?

Then she heard the lift. Stopping. The loft door sliding open. Thank God. She dragged her fingers through her hair, slipped off the sheets, regained her balance and put her skirt and blouse to rights.

Ready to give him a piece of her mind for worrying her like that, she came out onto the landing above the living area. And forgot what she was about to say.

A strange man was crossing the loft floor. Nick, profoundly unconscious, head dangling backwards, throat taut and exposed, was in his arms. The man was tall, broad. Strong. With an

incongruous gentleness he laid Nick on the couch, and sat beside him. She could see his face. If he looked up, he would see her. She froze, hardly daring to breathe, and stared as he reached out one elegant hand to lay its palm against Nick's cheek.

"Nicholas, Nicholas," the man murmured. "What am I to do with you? *Cher enfant,* it is time you grew up. Put aside your toys, these mortals, and joined me in the world of adults. Accept what you are. What I have made you. What I gave you, the best part of myself."

LaCroix? *This* was LaCroix? Whatever she had expected, it hadn't been this. This deep, beautiful voice shaded with a thousand different degrees of pain. This broad planed face, ravaged with tenderness.

He spoke again. "Do you think it pleases me, to punish you? What father takes pleasure in the pain of his child? A brother, in the anguish of a brother? You strike me, I strike you back. When will it end? Must it always be so? We are a part of each other, you and I. To hurt each other is to hurt ourselves. How long before you learn this? How much more must we suffer? Nicholas, you break my heart."

Natalie's fingers were bloodless about the railing. Struck dumb she watched as LaCroix leaned over and pressed his lips to Nick's forehead. Then he stood, and she saw Nick's hands.

They were charred to the bone.

She gasped.

LaCroix was beside her in a blur of black leather. Sick with fear, with loathing, she retreated. His expression was polite, enquiring. Completely superficial. Gone was the naked face of seconds before.

He said, smooth as cream, "I don't believe we've met. I am LaCroix. And you, I venture to guess, are Nat." His raised eyebrow invited a response. She nodded. "Now would that be Nat as in Natalie, or Nat as in a small, insignificant but rather irritating insect?"

She straightened her spine. "I'm Dr Natalie Lambert, Medical Examiner." Took a breath. Added, "And you're trespassing."

He laughed. "Very good! I'm impressed. Don't tell me he's managed to fall for a woman of spirit, at last. That would make a refreshing change. If you'd known some of the others, Nat, you'd blush for him."

She took a wary step backwards. He made no attempt to stop her. "I'm going down to him now. He's hurt."

"I know," said LaCroix. "I hurt him."

She wanted to hit him. To gouge and scratch and kick that urbane, impervious facade. Strangled with hatred, she said, "Why?"

The blue eyes were guileless. "He asked for it."

He did not fly, this time, but took the stairs in her wake, one after the other, like a mortal, as she raced to the couch.

Thumping her knees to the floor, she pressed a trembling hand to Nick's face. It was icy. The flesh beneath her fingers felt like latex. If he were human, she would say he was in deep, clinical shock. He wasn't human. Did it make a difference?

LaCroix, lounging against thin air, said, "He called for you, you know. Several times."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" she snapped. Her knees hurt.

"Not at all."

Ignoring him was out of the question. She tried anyway. Concentrated on Nick's hands, on the ivory gleam of carpal and metacarpal, and the stench of dead, burned flesh. Her stomach heaved.

"Are you sure you're all right?" he asked solicitously. "You don't look very well."

"I'm fine," Natalie managed to say. She needed her medical kit. It was downstairs, in the car. She'd die before she left Nick alone with this man.

No. This was not a man. The last flicker of humanity had died here before the last of the Romans came to power.

"Natalie," LaCroix protested. "You wound me."

Smiling, he wandered to the low table across from the couch and lifted the lid of the box housing Joan's cross. A muscle convulsed along his jaw, but he did not hiss, or turn away. His expression of casual interest remained, undisturbed.

Without bothering to close the lid he drifted away from the table, and began to inspect the book shelves. Natalie, her hand resting against Nick's unresponsive flesh, felt the agitation vibrate her like a jackhammer. *Don't touch that* she wanted to scream at him. *Get out, you weren't invited, he doesn't want you here.* Nerves thrumming she crouched in silence and watched LaCroix finger the statues and the

fossils, leaf through the books. He bent to read the titles on the spines of the videos and laughed aloud, murmuring, "Nicholas, Nicholas. Really."

At length he came to a halt before the scorch mark on the door. In silence he contemplated it, the way a visitor to the Louvre might absorb the Mona Lisa. Natalie held her breath. But he moved on, and nothing about him indicated anything save a mild, cursory interest.

He found the other, smaller, box, in which Nick kept the watch she'd given him for his birthday. It needed a new band. She'd meant to take it to the jewellers, but kept forgetting. LaCroix read the inscription.

"How sweet," he said, smiling at her, and tossed the watch onto the sideboard. Flung himself with extravagant ease into an arm chair and regarded her, prepared to reveal curiosity. "You intrigue me, Nat. What is it about him that attracts you?"

She could not, would not answer him. Refused to participate in a conversation not of her choosing. Instead she feasted her eyes on the delicate hollow beneath Nick's cheekbone, and told herself they were alone.

LaCroix said, "Is it his cold kisses? His cold flesh entwined about your hot, human body? Hmmm? Does he warm himself between your hot, hungry thighs and pretend the mortal heart he hears beating is his own?"

Blood scalded her face. She bit her lip and kept her eyes downcast, her hand unmoving on Nick's shoulder. "You're disgusting," she said, barely audible, knowing full well he would hear her.

He did not appear insulted. He said, "I see. But you wish he did, don't you? How disappointed you must be. Actually, you can take it as a compliment, of sorts. No doubt he considers his tongue too tainted to violate the sanctity of your mouth."

She really was going to be sick. She felt movement beneath her hand: Nick's eyelids flickered once, and were still.

LaCroix said, "I can change all that, you know. I can give you what you most desire: an endless parade of nights in his arms, his bed. I understand he is a masterful lover. Certainly I never heard Janette voice any complaint. I assume you've met Janette?"

The muscles beneath her hand quivered a second time. A frown formed between Nick's brows, then smoothed. She positioned her fingers against his carotid, and waited for the torpid leap of blood against her fingertips.

"Natalie?"

"No."

He feigned astonishment. No? Are you quite certain? I assure you, it would be no trouble at all. The least I could do, since you seem to have taken such good care of Nicholas for me while I was gone."

She had never wanted to cry so much in all her life. Very carefully she said again, "No." And looked up to meet his eyes.

Regret shaded his face. "Ah well. Another time, perhaps. It is, after all, a woman's prerogative to change her mind." He was on his feet again in a single, sinuous movement. "Well, it's been delightful chatting with you, my dear, but I must be on my way. A dinner engagement. I'm sure you understand. But before I take my leave ..."

He was beside her between one heart beat and the next. His hand was under her arm, drawing her upwards. Not a rough movement. Merely inexorable. Still holding her, he reached beneath the expensive leather coat he wore and plucked free three long white envelopes.

Giving them to her, he said "I nearly threw these out, but I know how perturbed you mortals become about loose ends."

"What are they?" she said, her voice paper dry.

"One of them is Alex's resignation. One is a letter to his sister. The last is a touching farewell to you. Quite genuine, I assure you."

Alex. Oh God, she'd forgotten about Alex.

"Where is he?" she asked.

LaCroix waved a vague hand. "Conversing with his Maker, I presume. Doubtless Jehovah is finding him as tedious as I did."

She'd never known that hatred could make you ill. Fighting the nausea she said, "You killed him."

"No," he said. "He killed himself. He decided he didn't want to live forever, so he took time by the forelock, so to speak." With interest he watched the tears well in her eyes, and slide swiftly down her blanched cheeks. "What? You loved him, too? What a profligate young doctor you are, to be sure." His voice chilled. "Now. As we are speaking of loose ends ..."

She tried to pull free as he stared directly into her eyes. There was a hard, hurting pressure inside her head. Suddenly she knew what he was attempting. It felt nothing like Nick, whose mental touch was forceful, but not obliterating.

If LaCroix suspected she would remember anything, anything at all ...

She let her eyes glaze over. Swayed in his casual, encompassing grip. Emulated to the best of her ability the look she remebered on Sarah's face, when Nick hypnotised her.

LaCroix said, "You never saw me. You came over here and you found Nicholas on the floor in the kitchen. In a moment, you will arrange things to look as though he'd had an accident at the stove. That is what you will believe has happened. To protect you, he will let you continue to believe it. He will think I arranged the scenario myself."

"An accident in the kitchen," she murmured. It was as good an explanation as any.

"Arrange it now. Put the letters in your pocket so you don't forget them."

It was the hardest thing she'd ever done, to keep her actions soft, dream like, natural. She filled the frypan with oil from his fake pantry and lit it, let the greasy smoke stain the wall before tossing in the tea towel, then smothering the flames with the pan lid.

"Excellent," LaCroix approved, after she had returned to Nick's side. "Now. You saw Alex earlier this evening. Only briefly. He gave you the letters, and left. You have no doubt that he is alive, and well, and elsewhere."

"Alex is fine," said Natalie

"He's fine," LaCroix agreed. "I am leaving now. You will wake up in five minutes time, believing you have just managed to get Nicholas onto the couch. *Au revoir,* Natalie. It was a pleasure to meet you. We must chat again some time. My offer, I assure you, remains open."

It was ten minutes before she dared move. When at last it seemed safe, that LaCroix would not return, she bolted downstairs to get her medical kit. Barrelling back into the loft, bag in hand, she heard Nick groan.

Blood. He was going to need blood. Bottles of it, by the look of things. She grabbed a full one from the refrigerator, just for starters, and returned to the couch.

"Nick?" she said gently, her hand on his shoulder. "Nick it's me, Natalie. Just lie still. You've been hurt."

Did morphine work on vampires? She had no idea. As a rule they didn't need it, but for some reason burns, be they from fire or the light, were different. He was going to need something, surely: already scarlet beads of sweat were stippling his forehead. She gave him a syringeful anyway, directly into the carotid, since finding venous pressure on him was little short of a joke.

"Nick?" she said again. His head was rolling from side to side on the cushion. A moan was building deep in his throat. His eyelids fluttered open, closed, open. She caught a glimpse of gold. Gold? Nick's eyes were blue.

Comprehension crashed upon her. She flung herself aside as he erupted from the couch; cowered by an arm chair, her arms over her head, as he threw back his head and howled.

There was nothing remotely human about him.

She didn't dare move. God, how could she be so *stupid* ? She should have known, or at least suspected, that this might happen. He howled again. Staggered two steps sideways, his mutilated hands cradled before him. The morphine didn't seem to be working.

He ranged about the room, stumbling into the table, a chair, fetching up against a book case, the stereo. Hissing. Snarling. Tears of fright snailed down her face. Nick, her Nick, would never hurt her. This wasn't her Nick.

He seemed unaware of her presence. That could change at any moment. When it did, she knew her life expectancy would be measured in heart beats. Her death at his ruined hands would destroy him. She had to do something. She had no idea what.

He was muttering something now, a melange of languages she only barely recognised. French, Italian, German, was that Russian? Something Slavic. Chinese -- Mandarin, Cantonese, maybe both. His

voice was gutteral. Unrecognizable. The monologue became disjointed. The sentences lost their rhythm, their capacity to make sense. Became noise.

As the pain beat him back and forth he began to lift from the floor, a step or two at a time. His lips pulled away from his -- no. Not teeth. Fangs. All she could hear now was a constant, keening moan. She wanted to scream shut up, shut up because the sound was fingernails on a blackboard, she couldn't bear it.

There was no sanity in him anywhere.

Appalled, she watched him rebound about the room, random spurts of levitation. Increasing in speed, in violence. He cried aloud every time his hands struck the wall, the window, brushed the back of the settee.as he stumbled from one obstacle into another.

Like a blind man.

She couldn't stay like this for much longer. He needed help. She needed help.

Janette.

His cellular phone was on the arm of the other leather chair. Just beyond reach. If she crawled ... knee by knee, elbow by elbow ... if she didn't breathe ...

She snatched the phone and pulled back to safety. The electronic beep as she powered up the phone sounded loud, but Nick didn't notice. Was hanging half way up one wall, shoulder blades flat to the bricks, eyes closed. He was singing.

All the phone's lights came on. Thank God he'd charged the battery. She went to dial. Stopped. She didn't know The Raven's number. Directory assistance took forever.

Janette answered on the fifth ring. "*Bon soir*. This is The Raven."

Natalie pressed her lips to mouth piece, terrified that the sound of her voice would alert Nick, and whispered, "Janette, it's Natalie Lambert. I need your help."

There was a lot of background noise. That dreadful head banging stuff Nick listened to when he was feeling depressed. "You will have to speak up, I cannot hear you," Janette said.

"I can't," Natalie said, raising her volume a quarter of a decibel. "Listen. Nick's hurt. You have to come to the loft."

"Is that Nicola's little mortal friend? Natalie?"

"Yes. Please, you have to --"

"Sorry, Natalie. I am not speaking to Nicola at the moment. Try again next century."

The line went dead. Natalie stared at it, incredulous, then punched the number again.

"Janette, just shut up and listen to me!" she demanded. "I'm at Nick's place. I need you here, now. Bring as much blood as you can fly with. Human blood. The straight stuff, not your house special. Break the sound barrier, or I swear I'll break your neck."

She nearly snapped a nail on the power off button. *Try again next century?* Bitch. She may be useful in a crisis, but she was still the worst influence in Nick's life.

No. Make that the second worst.

She shoved the phone safely under the chair, and looked up. Overhead, Nick was flying. Head thrown back, eyes closed. Crashing into the confines of the loft. His hands dangled by his sides, useless. Every time they hit the bricks, the glass, the rafters, he cried out. Short, sharp jabs of sound.

Once, she and Ritchie had stood in a the local mall and watched a wild bird dash itself to death against the impenetrable glass walls that surrounded them. Ritchie had begged her to save it, but she couldn't. All she could do was stand beside him, his hand safe and sticky in her own, and watch the bird die.

That wasn't going to happen now.

"Nick?" she called. "Please? Let me help you."

High above her, Nick flew. And shrieked. And neither saw, nor heard ... anything.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Janette pushed aside the door into Nick's loft saying, "This had better be good, Dr Lambert, I have a business to --" And then let out a small shriek as something whizzed over the top of her head. She dropped the satchel of blood and stared upwards.

"*Merde alors,*" she breathed. "*Nicola.*"

His little mortal friend was crouched by a chair. She was pale enough to be one of them. Janette watched as her stiff, set face crumpled.

"Don't you dare, doctor," she said sharply. "I despise snivelling mortals." Then she looked upwards again, at Nicola. His cries had given way to an eerie silence, and the rhythm of his flight had broken into a pointless spinning. His arms jerked as though he tried to pull away from his own hands.

She looked away. Took in the state of the loft, the broken pottery and the scattered books, the spilled compact discs and the overturned chair and the paintings dislodged from the walls.

"You were a fool to stay," she told Natalie. "He might have killed you."

"How could I leave him?" Natalie replied. Her face was wet, but she had herself under control once more. Which was just as well.

Janette picked her way through the debris that littered the floor, her head tilted so she could continue to watch Nicola as he banged and battered his away about beneath the ceiling.

"How long has he been like this?"

"I'm not sure. Twenty minutes, maybe. Ever since he woke up."

Frowning, Janette stared upwards. "What happened?"

"It was --" Natalie stopped.

"It was what?" Janette snapped, impatient. She couldn't stand this wretched woman, this mortal who fed all of Nicola's delusions, encouraged his ridiculous fantasies.

Natalie said, "How do I know I can trust you?"

Janette's head snapped round. Her eyes were gold. "*Trust* me? Choose your words with greater care, doctor. You called me, remember?"

To her credit, the woman didn't back down. "To help Nick."

Janette's fingers touched her throat. She said, "I am not interested in playing games with you. Tell me what happened."

Natalie swallowed. "His hands. Look at his hands."

She couldn't see from down here. Rising circumspectly, wary of startling him, she approached Nicola obliquely. Saw his hands.

LaCroix.

Knowing him, suspecting the depth of his rage, still the savagery of his retribution stunned her.

She had been caught in the sun twice. The pain, the madness of those moments were branded into her memory. Her torture had lasted only seconds, yet the pain had lingered into the night. Seconds, and her skin had blistered and bubbled. For wounds such as these, his hands must have been exposed for hours. Not all at once. That would have killed him. Just a minute at a time. Light, then dark. Light, dark. Over and over and over and over ...

Janette moaned. *Oh, Nicola.*

He flew like a bird on a string, round and round and round, oblivious to her presence. Humming, now. Tunes from his childhood, she thought, sung by a doting nurse. Or perhaps his *maman.* He'd spoken of her, once.

Nauseated, she averted her eyes from his hands. Glanced down. Natalie was on her feet now, staring up at them, her arms clutched across her chest. At least the woman had a useful occupation. Blood alone would likely not suffice here.

Blood. And how was she supposed to get him to drink anything, gyrating about up here? He had to lie down. Conserve what was left of his strength so he could heal.

"Nicola," she said sharply. "*Ecoutez. C'est moi.*"

He did not respond. From the floor Natalie called up, "He was talking, before. Well. Ranting, really. All different languages. Singing. Janette, I think --" She stopped. Regained control. "I think LaCroix may have driven him mad."

Nicola made no response to Natalie's voice. "You saw him? LaCroix?"

"I was here when he brought Nick back. We ... spoke. He thinks I don't remember him."

"Does he?" said Janette, and continued to watch Nicola circle the air below the ceiling. His eyes were open, but unseeing. His face was a blank expanse awaiting an emotion. And still he hummed. Nothing, now, that she could recognise. It was just a noise, lacking form or meaning.

Vampires could go mad. It was not a possibility she was prepared to accept. This was shock. Vampires could go into shock, too.

As an experiment she rose higher and tried to block his path. He simply flew around her. She tried again. The same.

"Enough with the aerial tango, Janette," Natalie said. "Just bring him down so I can fix him."

Fix him. Just like that.

"The way you've fixed him until now? Kept him permanently undernourished? Starving? Are you blind, doctor? He is *flying*. He is a vampire."

"Only temporarily."

"You call eight centuries temporary?"

"No," said Natalie. "He's way overdue for retirement. Look. I'm not going to debate the issue with you now. Probably not ever. We don't have to like each other to help Nick. We only have to help him."

Never were truer words spoken. He needed help, quickly. "Nicola," she said again. "Nicola, *faites attention. Ecoutez a moi.*" Had the pain made him deaf? She reached out her hands and took him by the arm.

She might just as well have detonated a bomb.

Below, Natalie screamed. Janette would have, if she'd had time. Grimly she hung onto him as he flailed and twisted and whipped her back and forth. It was like a rodeo. Only mortals would do it for fun. They crashed into the wall, a window, the ceiling. His face was contorted, distorted. Natalie was right. He was mad.

Surely not even LaCroix had intended this.

"Do something!" Natalie shrieked, running about like a rabbit.

"What?" Janette shrieked back, and cried aloud as her head cracked against the corner of a book case.

"I don't know! Bite him!"

Good idea. She sank her teeth into the side of his neck. The blood poured down the back of her throat, and with it came the memories.

"Terrific!" Natalie yelled. "It's working, he's slowing down."

Janette heard herself whimper. Bad, bad idea. She couldn't move. Couldn't break free.

"That should do it," called Natalie. "You can bring him down now."

Janette felt her arms go around him, support him, as his struggles ceased. He was limp in her arms, like a child. Like little Cockney Daniel, as he slept, and changed.

"Janeete, are you crazy?" Natalie demanded. "What the hell are you doing? You'll exsanguinate him! Stop!"

What had started as a torrent was now a mere trickle. Janette swallowed once, twice. Swallowed nothing. Bloated, dizzy, she loosened her arms. Nicola slid from her grasp and crashed to the floor.

"Her own landng was scarcely more dignified. Natalie said, My God! Are you out of your mind?" and rolled Nicola onto his back, her hands checking for broken bones. Presumably found none, for she said, "Don't just stand there. Get the blood. I'll have to transfuse him. I just hope I can find an artery still on its feet."

Blood. Janette pressed her hands to her head. She could feel blood on her face, sticky on her mouth and chin. Her head was spinning. "No," she whispered. "Oh, no ..."

"What do you mean, no," Natalie snapped. "I don't know what happens if you let a vampire run out of petrol, and I don't want to find out. Just get the blood!"

Janette groped for a chair, a table, anything. "*No,*" she whispered again. "*Don't. Alex.*" She doubled over. "No," she moaned. "I don't want this. I don't want to know this."

Natalie said, "Janette? What is it?"

She slid from the arm chair to the floor. Knelt on the hard wood, her arms clutching her stomach. "*You pushed me, and you pushed me, until I had no choice.*"

"Janette, for God's sake snap out of it! I need you!"

The memories burned like sunlight in the blood. "*Pas encore, je tu supplie, pas encore. Qu'est-ce que tu veux? Je regrette ... je regrette ... absolutement ... Nat!*"

"I'm here. Janette, I'm here. What is it?"

Janette rocked. "*No more*," she sobbed. "*You will drive me mad. LaCroix, no more, I beg you. Call the Enforcers. They can have my head, my heart, I don't care. No more.*" She wailed. "*Oh ... God ... Nat.*"

Natalie knew, then, what was happening. Didn't understand the how, or the why. Janette was humming now, still rocking. Her eyes were open, unseeing. Her hands lay on her thighs, palms up, fingers curved slightly. Pale, whole. The anguish in her face twisted Natalie's stomach. She stared at Nick.

He looked dead. He was dead. Without blood, would he stay that way?

Janette staggered to her feet. Looked about her, one hand pressed to her scarlet mouth. The other clutched her middle. She retched. Retched again. Bolted to the kitchen, and vomited all of Nick's blood into the sink.

"If you've finished," said Natalie, "give me a hand. I can't do this on my own."

As Janette dragged the satchel of blood to where Nick lay, she opened a hole in his carotid with a scalpel, and shoved a cannula as far as it would go into the flaccid artery. Thank God subtlety was not a prerequisite here. Then she attached the free end of the cannula to a bag of blood and gave it to Janette.

"Hold this up," she said, and turned her attention to the hands. Slathered them with SSD, tiled them with squares of paraffin impregnated gauze, and lightly bandaged them.

They emptied seven bags of blood into him. "That should be enough for now," she said, but left the capped cannula in the side of his neck, just to be on the safe side. "Let's make him comfortable."

They put a pillow under his head, and covered him in a blanket, and looked at each other.

"Are you okay?" Beneath the dried blood, Janette was as bleached as bone.

"Certainly," said Janette, and went upstairs to repair her appearance.

It was nearly half past ten. Natalie picked up the empty blood bags and tossed them in the bin. Janette came downstairs, face clean, hair rearranged.

Natalie said, "You wouldn't care to explain all that, would you?"

Janette perched on the edge of the couch. "Not really."

"Explain anyway."

Janette closed her eyes. Her body convulsed in a shiver. "No," she said. "I do not think so."

Natalie turned away. Janette said, "It was a brave thing you did, tonight.

"Staying here?"

Janette smiled. "Threatening me."

Natalie stared. "He needed you." She remembered something. "Why aren't you speaking to him?"

Janette shrugged. "We had a disagreement."

"About?"

"*Ce n'est pas important.*"

Natalie surrendered her aching body to an arm chair. "And even if it were, you wouldn't tell me. Right?"

Janette said, "Dr Lambert, you know too much already."

Three more times that evening, as the dark dragged towards the dawn, Natalie and Janette gave Nick blood. In the end they resorted to the bottles in the refrigerator. Janette shuddered.

"How he can drink this -- this --- *vache.*

Natalie unrolled one bandage and lifted the edge of gauze. "Thank God. At last. He's beginning to heal."

New tissue was granulating along the bones. You couldn't exactly call it a *healthy* colour, but at least it wasn't black. And speaking of which ...

"What are you doing?" said Janette, watching as Natalie collected a clean, stiff bristled paint brush and three sheets of newspaper.

"Wounds like this need to be debrided," Natalie explained, sitting cross legged beside Nick, and spreading the papers. "The dead tissue has to be cleared away so it doesn't interfere with the healing process."

Carefully she worked the paint brush in and around the bones of his hands, sweeping away the crumbling, burned flesh. Some small, detached part of her was vastly amused by Janette's horror, her refusal to watch. When she had finished she rebandaged him.

"That's really all I can do," she said. "Now we wait."

Coffee kept her going. Preparing yet another cup -- if caffeine really was carcinogenic, she was in deep do do -- she remembered the letters in her pocket. Her eyes flooded.

Clutching the jar of instant Nick kept in solitary confinement, just for her, she held her breath until the tears subsided. She couldn't, wouldn't, break down in front of Janette.

She read them as the mug of coffee cooled. The resignation was brief. Believable. She'd give it to Stonetree in the morning. Folding it carefully along its creases she tucked it back into the unsealed envelope, set it aside on the bench top, and looked at the second envelope. It was addressed to Heidi Robinson, in Vancouver. His sister. She laid it with the resignation.

The third envelope was marked, simply, 'Natalie'. She stared at it. Afraid to open it. Afraid to admit more pain. Afraid.

She tore it open.

A few lines. Written by a steady hand. The pen was faulty, the ink patchy on the page.

Forgive me, but I have no choice. I'm not Nick. I can't do it. I don't have his strength. Please don't blame him. I got it all wrong. Post the letter to Heidi for me. I've told her everything. She'll come and get my things. Take something to remember me by.

Alex.

She did cry then, hunched over the cooling coffee mug. Oh Alex, Alex. He hadn't deserved a death like that. If only she'd tried harder to make him leave. If only she'd been able to convince Nick to tell him the truth at the very beginning. If only LaCroix had stayed safely dead.

LaCroix.

A *father*? A *brother*? How could Nick for one *moment* regret killing him?

She'd told Nick she would never forgive him if something happened to Alex. Something had happened. So was she betraying Alex now, by helping Nick? By not turning her back and leaving him to his LaCroix, and his Janette, and his world of blood and night?

God help her. She could no more leave him than fly.

And what did that say about her?

"Natalie? Is something wrong?" Janette called.

She straightened. Tipped the coffee down the sink.

"No," she said. "Nothing's wrong."

Despite the caffeine percolating in her system, she couldn't stop herself from dozing off. Every time she jerked awake she checked the rate of healing, dribbled a little more blood down the cannula. Not once, not even for a second, did he stir.

Just before dawn, Janette said, "Will he be sane, when he wakes?"

Startled, Natalie snapped up straight in the armchair and winced. Her chiropractor was going to give her hell when she saw him next week. She stifled a yawn.

"I have no idea," she said, gazing down at Nick. "You'd know better than me."

Janette laid aside the book she'd been reading and eyed Natalie curiously. "You appear intelligent. Why do you bother with him?"

"He's a good man."

"He's not any kind of man, doctor. He hasn't been for nearly eight centuries."

"I don't accept that."

Janette said impatiently, "I knew people who wouldn't accept that the earth is round. This sphere on which we live did not flatten to accommodate them."

Natalie glared at her. "I don't care what you say, or what you think, or what you want. Nick asked me to help him. That's all I care about."

"Really?" Janette's expression mimicked surprise. "You don't care that he's a killer? You don't care that he has drunk the blood of humans, man, woman, and child, for centuries? You don't care that he has hunted your kind for sport, for pleasure, for entertainment? You don't care that --"

"Shut up!" Natalie said fiercely. "I know what he was!"

"What he *is*," Janette corrected. "He may carry a badge and drink cow's blood, but scratch the surface and you have the vampire who wanted to feed from Detective Schanke."

Natalie's chin came up. "He may have wanted to, but he didn't."

Janette dimpled. "This time."

On the floor beside them Nick slept, unmoving.

Natalie took a deep breath. "You want him to fail, don't you."

"I want him to stop this ridiculous pursuit of his soul. His humanity. He has neither."

"Oh, no," said Natalie. "What you want is to keep him with you. Dependant on you. So that you don't have to live in your world alone."

Janette's eyebrows lifted. "And you don't?"

A stark silence.

"You foolish woman!" Janette snapped. "I'm trying to save you needless pain. You have no idea what you are dabbling with. You've read too much Emily Weiss. You're like every other infatuated mortal woman he's known. And believe me, there have been dozens. Dozens of dozens. If you knew --"

Natalie said. "I know he's killed. He told me that from the very beginning. It makes no difference."

Janette sighed. "To know a fire is hot, and to put your hand in the flames are two different things, doctor." Her smile was mocking. "He is what he is, and nothing you can do will change that. But if you feel compelled to squander the few years you have left in this futile quest for a cure, feel free. Eventually you will die. And he will not. And nothing will have changed, except the numbers on the calendar."

Despite the pain, Natalie continued to hold Janette's gaze. "You may be right," she said. "I may fail. I may get hit by a bus. Or die from any one of the diseases that afflict we mere mortals. But if you think my death, whenever it happens, is going to stop him, then you don't know him as well as you think you do. In fact, you don't know him at all." She took a deep breath, and let it out. "If I fail, it won't be because I was too afraid to try."

After that, no more was said until Natalie looked up to find that the sky, framed by the open windows, had turned a strange colour.

"It's sunrise," she said, and looked around for the remote. "I'd better close the shutters."

"I'll do it," said Janette. She unfolded from her chair, the remote held tightly in one white hand. "Nicola has had enough light, for now."

Natalie looked at Nick's hands.

On this one thing, they were in perfect agreement.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Nick opened his eyes at three minutes to eight. Janette was curled up on the couch, asleep. Natalie, bone weary, drooped beside him on the floor, sitting on a cushion. She lifted her head, feeling him shift beneath her hand.

"Easy, Nick. Lie still," she said, scratchy voiced.

He stared at her, his eyes blue, confused. "Nat?"

At the sound of his voice, Janette sat up. "Nicola!"

"Janette?" he whispered.

He was as lost as a child. Natalie could have wept. As it was, his face blurred for a moment. Blinking rapidly she said, "It's okay, Nick. You're safe. No, don't try to sit up."

"I feel --" He stopped. "Drained."

"It's morning."

"No. Not like that. I --" He stared at his bandaged hands. "Nat? What's going on? What happened to my hands?"

She stared across him at Janette. Moistened her lips. "Uh, you don't remember?"

"No. The last thing I remember is --" He swallowed. "That's not possible. Vampires don't forget."

Janette said smoothly, "You had an accident, Nicola. I blame Natalie entirely. All this ridiculous nonsense about eating 'real food'. You were cooking. You set the frypan on fire, and burned your hands. I came by to see you about something, and found you on the floor. I called Natalie and she came."

"Nat?"

Natalie closed her mouth and looked down at him. "Uh, yeah. Janette called me. They were bad burns, Nick. We had to give you transfusions most of the night."

Bewildered, he said, "Transfusions?"

"Yep. And speaking of which, stay still for a moment. Don't move your head." Swiftly she removed the cannula from his neck, and taped the edges of the wound together with butterfly strips. "There. That'll heal in a few minutes, I expect."

"I'm hungry," said Nick.

"I'll get you a bottle."

"I'll get it," said Janette.

"Help me up," said Nick. So she helped him sit on the couch, and held the glassfuls of blood to his lips until the bottle was empty. Janette stood to one side, her expression disapproving.

"It should be real blood," she said.

"Janette," he said.

Natalie put the empty bottle and the glass on the floor. "So what's the last thing you do remember?" she asked.

He frowned. "The case. We're in the middle of a case, the Wallis murder. The other children. We -- aren't we?"

Numb, Natalie stared at him. That much? He'd lost that much? "The case is solved, Nick. There's been an arrest.

"An arrest?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Doesn't *matter*? Nat, I can't remember!" He turned to Janette. "Do you understand this?"

"Not completely," she said. "They were very bad burns, Nicola. You were unconscious when I found you. In shock. Or at least as close to shock as we can come. There is precedent for memory loss, although it is rare."

He said, "My hands hurt."

Natalie touched his shoulder lightly. "I wish there was something I could give you, but I don't think morphine works on vampires. Can you tough it out?"

"Do I have a choice?" His smile was brief. "How long before I heal?"

"I don't know."

"Have you told Alex yet? He'll need to hold the fort on his own tonight."

Tell Alex? That meant ... oh, God. What should she do? How much, precisely, had he forgotten? How much truth should she tell him? Janette had been the first to lie. She must have a reason. Could she trust Janette? For herself, not for a New York minute. But for Nick ...

"Nat?" he prompted.

She stood. Took a deep breath and turned around. Janette's gaze was fierce. She shook her head, the merest movement. Natalie released the pent up lungful of air. Sat in the chair opposite.

"Alex has resigned," she said.

"Resigned? What do you mean, he's resigned. He can't have resigned."

The lies came so easily. "I saw him last night. I've got his letter to give to Stonetree. This case was too much for him. He's quitting the force. Going back to the seminary, to finish his studies and take his vows."

"But -- no. Music, maybe. He'd found some guy, Eddie someone, said he had contacts. He's gone back to the seminary?"

Natalie took slow, even breaths. *Eddie someone.*

He didn't remember LaCroix at all.

She could feel Janette's shock, mirroring her own. Janette said, "You don't remember meeting this Eddie person?"

"No. When did I meet him? Where?"

Janette sat beside him and laid her hand against his cheek. "You met him in the Raven. It was a coincidence. You exchanged pleasantries, and then went off to work."

"But who is he?"

"No one of importance," said Janette. "Think no more of him."

It broke Natalie's heart to see Nick so unsure. She felt like a criminal, lying to him. What the hell was Janette up to?

He said, "He can't resign. He's too good a cop. I have to see him, talk him out of it."

"You can't," said Natalie. "I mean, he's gone. Left town. No forwarding address. He doesn't want to see any of us again. He says the memories are too painful."

"Oh, Nat ..."

Somehow, she smiled. "Hey, it's okay. I've still got Sidney."

Janette said, "You must lie down in a proper bed, now, Nicola. You must rest. You must heal."

"She's right," said Natalie. "You need sleep."

Unresisting, he allowed himself to be helped to his feet.

Natalie said, "Straight up stairs, now. Janette, can I have a word?"

Swaying a little, Nick said, "I'll see you tonight, Nat?"

"Sure."

"He will be all right?" Janette demanded, watchng his weaving progress to the stairs.

"Eventually. A good day's sleep will work wonders," said Natalie. She hesitated. "Listen. I could take you back to The Raven in the Caddy's trunk, but can you stay? I can't, and he shouldn't be alone."

"You think I would leave him?" Janette asked, eyes hostile.

"I don't know what to think," said Natalie.

Janette folded her arms across her chest. "We are lying because the truth can serve no useful purpose."

"Except that it happens to be true."

Janette sneered. "Human morality."

"If your precious LaCroix had more of it, none of this would have happened!" Natalie said fiercely.

"If you truly love him," said Janette, "pray to your God that he never remembers what LaCroix did to him."

"And if he does? Or if LaCroix comes back? What then?"

Janette was silent. Eventually she said, "Then we do what the situation suggests. When -- not if -- LaCroix returns, whatever happens will happen. We have no control over that. It may be tomorrow.

Next week. Next month. Next year. Time is irrelevant to LaCroix. In the meantime, let Nicola believe that he is free. He will need the memory, to sustain him in the days to come."

Anger seared Natalie. "Don't you even *care* about what he did?"

Janette's eyebrows lifted. "You think LaCroix was unreasonable, to object to attempted murder?"

Natalie shivered. "I don't understand you. Any of you."

"And you never will. Nicola was thirty five years a human, and has been a vampire for seven hundred and sixty six. Which do *you* think has made the biggest impression?" When Natalie didn't answer she said, "You do know, don't you, that Alex is dead?"

Natalie bit her lip. "Yes. LaCroix killed him."

"He killed himself," Janette said sharply. "In front of Nicola, who considered him a friend. It was a selfish, cowardly act."

"I'm not going to discuss Alex with you," said Natalie.

Shrugging, Janette said, "Fine. Let us discuss Nicola, then. As a doctor, do you have any explanation for his loss of memory?"

"I'm guessing, but I think part of it has to do with the fact that you drained him of blood."

"Part of it, yes. But the memories I took were recent. No more than forty eight hours. And I'm not sure that explains the amnesia. Or why he has forgotten so much more."

Natalie thought for a moment. "Humans, under certain circumstances -- often in cases of very severe injury or overwhelming emotional trauma -- will wipe out whole areas of experience that are just too painful to remember." As Janette, frowning, opened her mouth to speak, Natalie held up one hand. "I know. Nick isn't human. But we're working on it. Who knows? Maybe we're closer than we thought."

Janette scowled. "I will go to him now," she said.

Natalie watched her stalk up the stairs and disappear into Nick's room. God, her head was pounding. Getting up, she rummaged in her medical kit for a Tylenol, washed it down with tap water and then set about cleaning up the kitchen.

After that, she began to straighten up the rest of the loft. Nick was the most fanatical housekeeper she'd ever met. The loft was never untidy. Never. She couldn't possibly go home leaving the place like the aftermath of a hurricane. When he eventually woke it would be to a nice, neat, clean home. After all, they were friends. It was the least she could do.

And if she kept herself busy enough, for long enough, she would eventually fall asleep without having to think about all the new secrets there were to keep.

First she scrubbed the scarlet sink silver. Then she rehung the fallen paintings. Swept up the shards of shattered pots, putting into boxes those pieces that could be glued back together into an approximation of themselves. Discarded the pieces smashed beyond recovery. Four cd covers were cracked: she hunted down the sticky tape and mended them. She righted the overturned chairs, and repositioned all the furniture into its latest configuration. Restocked the shelves with scattered books. Folded up the blanket that had kept Nick covered through the night, and put it with the pillow on the end of the couch.

When she was done, she double checked she'd put everything back in her medical kit and checked her watch. Quarter to ten. She'd swing by the precinct house on her way home, explain Nick's absence and give Stonetree Alex's letter.

Then she was going to make like a vampire, and sleep away the rest of the day. Hey, find her a set of fake fangs and who could tell the difference? She couldn't remember the last time she'd tried to get a sun tan.

What the hell. Everybody knows that too much sun can kill you.

She tiptoed upstairs for one last inspection. The bedroom door was open. Leaning her bone weary body against the framework she looked in.

He was asleep. Cheek pillowed on black velvet and white flesh. Cradled in the fierce protective curve of Janette's arms. Utterly still, utterly silent. All self defence abandoned. All measured control surrendered.

He was smiling.

She closed the door, and went home.

"*Zippidee do da, zippidee ay,*" sang Schanke as he tap danced his way up the kerb and onto the pavement, "*my oh my, what a wonderful day!*" He punched the intercom on Knight's security screen. "Yo, Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your golden hair. Your better half is here."

The door clicked open. Humming, he sashayed into the elevator. At the top the door slid open. He stepped into the loft, arms wide.

"*Plenty of sunshine, comin' my way. Zippidee do da, zippidee ay!* Howdy, pardner." he said.

Nick looked up from rinsing out a glass in the kitchen sink. "Hi, Schanke. Don't give up your day job."

Schanke laughed. "Give it up? Are you kidding? I just got the results from my last physical. I am AOK and ready to rock and roll." He threw himself into the nearest chair with a sigh.

"That's terrific," said Nick. He picked up a tea towel and gingerly dried his hands, wincing a little.

"Speaking of physicals," said Schanke, "Nat said you burned yourself. You okay?"

"Sure," said Nick. "Nothing too serious."

"What the hell were you doing frying steak anyway? I thought you were the one on the superman macrobiotic diet? Geez, even *I* know fried foods are bad for you."

Nick looked at him. "That doesn't stop you eating them."

"No," agreed Schanke. "But at least I'll die fully informed." He grinned. "You coming in tomorrow night?"

"Yeah. Should be."

"Great."

Nick crossed to the couch and sat down. Schanke pointed to his hands. "Show me." Sighing, Nick held them up, front and back. "They don't look so bad," said Schanke.

"I'm a fast healer," said Nick. "So. Are you back to full duty?"

"Not officially. I mean, I'm supposed to fly a desk for a week or two, but hey. If I'd wanted to be a pilot I'd've joined Air Canada, you know?"

"Yeah." Nick rested his arms along the back of the couch, and let his hands dangle. "How's Jenny doing?"

"Okay," said Schanke. "She's okay. She's sleeping better. She actually caught the bus to school today. First time since the McMurtry thing started. Me and Myra sat her down, explained that he was in prison and he couldn't get out to hurt her now." He sighed. "I think she believed us. I hope she did. I hope we weren't lying to her."

"He'll never beat extradition," Nick said.

Schanke pulled a face. "Well, you wouldn't think so, but I've put in a few years now on good ol' Mother Earth, and I have to tell you, amigo, that nothing, but nothing surprises me any more."

Nick smiled. "You crusted old cynic, you."

"Yeah, well, I got a good five -- six years on you -- I think -- how old are you, exactly, anyway?"

"Old enough to be coy about it."

Schanke grinned. "Yeah, well, when you've seen what I've seen in this job, you'll be a crusted old cynic too." His smile faded. "You know what the worst thing about all this was? Being stuck in the damned hospital. Away from Myra and Jenny. Not able to protect them. 'Cause that's my job, you know? When it comes right down to it, that's my job. Protecting the people I love most in the world. If I can't do that ..."

"I know," said Nick. "It shrivels your very soul."

Schanke eyed him thoughtfully. "You sure you're okay? You seem kind of down."

"I'm fine."

"Uh huh," said Schanke. He drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair. "So. Hell of a thing with Alex Haid, eh? Who'd've thought he'd pull a stunt like that? Not even *my* finely tuned bullshit detecting nose sniffed that one coming. Stonetree's ripping up the linoleum with his bare teeth. It's all anyone's talking about down at the precinct. And he didn't breathe a word about leaving to you?"

"No," said Nick. A frown chased across his face. "At least, I don't think he did. I seem to have misplaced the last few days."

"Yeah. Nat said. Weird, huh? Maybe you hit your head after burning your hands. "

"Maybe."

"Mind you, I can't seem to remember very much about the shooting. It's all kind of a big blur, now. Doctors say it was because of the anaesthetics and the pain killers and junk they were pumping into me. Or the trauma of being shot. Who knows?"

"How are you doing with that?" said Nick.

Schanke shrugged. "I gotta see the department shrink on Monday. SOP. I'm fine. I guess I won't really know until the next punk pulls a piece on me."

"Does it bother you?"

"Some," Schanke admitted. "But like I tell Myra, what's the use in worrying? Won't change what happened. Won't stop whatever's coming down the line."

No," said Nick. "I suppose not."

There was a companionable silence. Schanke watched Nick flex his fingers. The movement clearly hurt him. Strange. He'd never seen Nick in pain before. Never seen him hurt himself, for that matter. Not even to bump his funny bone. This clear discomfort now made him. vulnerable. Which was also strange. Nick always struck him as the least vulnerable person he'd ever met. Physically, at least. Emotionally ... well, that was another can of worms.

He slung his heels onto the coffee table and heaved a contented sigh. "So how's Natalie taking Alex's disappearing act? I mean, she seemed jim dandy this morning, but you know Nat. She's not exactly your typical emotional female."

There was a slight pause. "I don't know," said Nick. "We haven't discussed it."

"Uh huh," said Schanke. "How are *you* taking it?"

"Me?"

"Yeah, you. I know you liked the guy, Nick. It was pretty obvious that you'd connected. So I'm asking, how are you taking his Houdini impersonation? I mean, he said good bye to Natalie. Why not you?"

He watched Nick consider and reject several possible responses. Guy was like an open book ... sometimes.

In the end Nick said, "I guess ... my feelings are hurt."

"Sure. Mine would be, if it was you. I mean, if you decided to quit, I'd want to know about it. I'd want to know why. I sure as hell wouldn't be too impressed if you shot through without so much as an adios, amigo."

The look Nick gave him was peculiar. He said, "Maybe it wasn't something he could explain, Schank. Maybe he just had to do it."

Schanke shook his head. "Nah. You don't walk away without saying good bye. Besides, he owed you."

"No," said Nick. "I don't believe in those kind of debts. What good is a friendship with strings attached? Anyway. Maybe he did explain, and I just can't remember."

"Bummer," said Schanke, then looked at his watch. "Geez, is that the time? I gotta go, or Myra'll skin me alive. I'm taking her out for dinner, to celebrate me getting the all clear. We're going to the Polka Palace. It's just opened. Dancing all night. Should be great."

"Yeah," echoed Nick. "Great."

"Might even give that place your friend owns a run for its money."

"We live in an age of miracles," said Nick.

"So, I'll see you tomorrow night. Eat. Drink. Be merry." He winked. "You might even consider cheering Natalie up. Helping her get over her broken heart. It's about time you two stopped pussy footing around, here. Neither of you is getting any younger."

"No," said Nick.

Exasperated, Schanke hoisted himself to his feet. It was weird. Sometimes Knight got a look on his face that made you feel like a kid, or something. And then other times, like now, he reminded you of your own kid the time she found her pet goldfish Bluto belly up in the tank. He shoved his hands in his pockets to overcome the impulse to pat him on the head.

"You take care of yourself, then, compadre. Go see a movie or something. You gotta get out more, instead of staying locked up in this place."

"Sure, Schank."

"Yeah, sure," Schanke grumbled, and kept on grumbling all the way down to the street. As if Knight was ever going to listen to him, right? Knight thought he knew it all.

It was a bright night. A full moon balanced on the tip of the city skyline. Schanke stared up at it. Took a deep breath.

'"*Whe-e-e-e-en .... the moon hits your eye like a great apple pie, that's ... a-moooooo-ray!*"

Somewhere, a dog howled.

"Ah, shut up!" said Schanke, fishing in his pocket for his car keys. "Everyone's a critic."

Natalie came by half an hour after Schanke left.

"Hey," she said, leaving the elevator door open.

"Hey yourself," he replied, and put aside St Augustine's 'Confessions'. Considered her closely. She was looking tired. Drawn. Her eyes were dull. The corners of her mouth drooped. She gave him a quick smile, but wouldn't meet his eyes.

"I can't stay long," she said. "I'm out of cat food. If I don't go grocery shopping tonight Sidney is going to arrange a lynching."

"Sure," said Nick. "I appreciate you stopping by."

"How are the hands?"

"Sore."

"Let me see."

She sat beside him on the couch, and took his hands in her own. She had such a gentle touch. And he loved the way her lower lip pouted, just a little, when she concentrated.

"Make a fist." He obeyed. "Does that hurt?"

"A bit."

"That'll fade."

"What about my memory, Nat? Will it come back?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I wouldn't worry about it too much, if I were you. They were pretty nasty burns. You might be better off not remembering how you got them." She released his hands. "You'll be all right. Another bottle and some more sleep and I think you'll be completely recovered."

He smiled. "And then I promise I'll get back on the wagon. Cross my heart and hope to die."

As a rule she groaned at that kind of pun. Slapped him, laughing. Now she just flinched. Stared at the floor, and wouldn't meet his eyes.

"Nat ... talk to me."

"What about?"

"Anything. Nothing. I don't know. Just ... talk."

She got up. "I'm too tired."

He watched her walk to the piano. Ripple sound from it with one finger, then put both hands in her linen jacket pockets, and stare out of the naked windows into the night sky.

He'd only once before felt this distant from her. After their argument over Roger. Was that it, then? Had they argued? He couldn't remember.

He didn't know which was worse, the chasm that yawned between them, or the one in his memory.

He said, "Do you believe that I'm sorry about Alex?"

She nodded. "Yes. I believe you're sorry."

"Do you know -- " He stopped. She looked at him, enquiringly. "Did he call me? Did we talk, about where he was going? About why he was leaving?"

"I don't know," she said.

"Because I don't remember, Nat. I really don't ... do you know how much I *hate* that?"

"I can imagine."

"I liked Alex, Nat. I thought we could be friends. You know?" He shook his head. "I never thought he'd be the type to cut and run. He didn't mention me at all, when you saw him?"

"Yes," she said. "He mentioned you."

"What did he say?"

"He said he'd got it all wrong. And that he wasn't you."

"Got what wrong? What was he talking about?"

"I don't know."

"Well, didn't you ask?"

"It wasn't that kind of conversation."

Uncertain, he stared at her. "Nat, you have told me everything, haven't you?"

"Of course," she said. "Why wouldn't I?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. But you seem ... different. A long way away."

She smiled, but not at him. "You're imagining things. I told you. I'm tired."

He stood, and decreased the physical distance between them. She didn't move, but he could feel that she wanted to. He stepped closer, and put his arms around her. It was like holding a shop mannequin.

"I really did want it to work out for you, Nat. I really want you to be happy."

The only other times he'd held her were when Richard lay dying in hospital, and after Roger. Now, as then, she pulled free of his embrace.

"I have to go," she said.

"Natalie, wait!"

She stopped half way to the door. Didn't move as he halted behind her, close enough to touch her, and said, "Nat, please. You're like a stranger. Have I done something? Said something? If I have, tell me. I'll make it up to you somehow. But don't freeze me out like this."

She turned. There were tears in her eyes. "Don't pay any attention to me, Nick. I'm being stupid. I got jilted, and my ego's bruised. I'll get over it."

"Then it's not me? It isn't anything I've done?"

She blinked the tears away. "No. It's nothing you've done. You've never hurt me intentionally."

Afraid, he stared at her. "But unintentionally ...?"

"Hey," she said. "We all do that. Occupational hazard of friendship. Now, I've really gotta go."

"Yeah ... okay ... will I see you tomorrow?"

She nodded. "Tomorrow."

He kissed her cheek. A nice, safe, brotherly kiss. "Good. Drive carefully."

She nodded. The loft door closed, and he was alone again. The loft was silent. He didn't like it. Hungry, he poured himself a glass of blood and took it over to his music collection. Searched through the records and discs for something to play. He frowned. He didn't remember dropping a cd, or mending one either. Yet his recording of Eine Kleine Nacht Musik had a cracked, sticky taped together cover.

He shivered. Be careful what you wish for ... how often had he wanted to forget, oh, so many things? And now he had, and he didn't like it one little bit.

Be careful what you wish for ...

You'd think he'd have learned that lesson.

What he *had* learned was to pay more attention to his instincts. He didn't like food. If Natalie was so convinced that eating fried steak was going to bring him back over, then in the future she could cook it for him herself.

His searching fingers found Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No. 3. Guiomar Novaes, soloist. Von Karajan conducting the London Symphony Orchestra. He put it on, and moved back to the window, sipping, as the rushing music spilled over him.

New York City. November 28, 1909. LaCroix's excitement. "We are the first, Nicholas, the first to hear this glorious work. Sergei's third concerto. And when all these pathetic mortals are but dust on the wind, when Sergei himself is but a footnote in some dry Conservatoire textbook, we shall still remember how it was! We shall close our eyes and be here once again. Are we not lucky, Nicholas? Are we not blessed?"

LaCroix, and the passion and the pathos of the music.

Strange, how he hardly ever remembered the good times. And there had been good times. Moments of shared pleasure that did not depend on killing. Laughter. Comradeship. Stories of things he had seen, and done. Lessons learned. Praise bestowed.

Slowly he swirled the cow's blood around the bowl of the glass. Stared through his unbarred window into the indigo sky. The moon was full. A grand night for flying.

Maybe some other time.

He drained the glass. Perhaps his memory would return. Perhaps it wouldn't. That, like so much else, was beyond his control.

But of all the things his capricious subconscious had chosen to expunge ... against all expectations, he was glad that LaCroix was not among them.

EPILOGUE

Janette threw down her pen in disgust, and reached for her glass. Wretched mortals and their wretched income tax forms. Surely by now there had to be a reliable vampire tax consultant in Toronto. She would ask around again. Tax forms might not be the death of her, but they were certainly making eternity less than scintillating.

There was a knock on the door. "Who is it?" she snarled, with a hint of teeth.

"Alma."

"I told you I did not wish to be disturbed unless —" Janette began, but then the door was opened, pushed wide. Alma was not alone. "Oh," said Janette. "Thank you, Alma. That will be all. Do not disturb me again unless the Raven is on fire. And even then ... think twice."

"Okay."

"And close the door."

The door was pulled shut behind her visitor.

LaCroix smiled. "*Bon soir, cherie. Ca va?*"

"*Bon soir*," Janette replied. Damn him all to hell, anyway. She'd not even had a *hint* of his presence, not even when all that separated them was a flimsy wooden door.

So what else was new? After a thousand years ... the last few days ... you'd think she would have learned.

LaCroix took a slow turn around the room, one gloved hand drifting from book case to picture frame to drape, the other releasing his coat buttons so that the heavy leather swung about him without restraint. "I called in to see you, last night."

"I was out."

"So I discovered. Your very helpful barman said you got a phone call about nine and took off like a bat out of hell."

Only LaCroix could threaten to disturb the changeless rhythm of her heartbeat. "A friend in need."

He turned then, green eyed, and said, "Really? Anyone I know?"

Abruptly, she was tired of games. With a straight spine and elevated chin she said, "You cannot, surely, be surprised. Nicola was always my concern."

"And mine."

She stared at him. He'd never made any attempt to hide from her his feelings for Nicola. And knowing what she knew ... outrage warred with prudence, and won. "How *could* you?" she demanded.

His regard was arctic. "He raised his hand to me."

"And how many times have you raised yours to him? Without provocation, without just cause? For no other reason than you were piqued, and he was there?"

"He knows by now what is acceptable behaviour, and what is not. Surely you're not suggesting I lack the right to punish?"

"To punish, no!" she cried. "But what you did was unjust!"

"*Au contraire, mignonne*. It was the very essence of justice. It fit the crime."

She could have scratched his eyes out. She said, "No. It was too cruel. I will never forgive you."

His glance was reproving. "Never is a very long time." He snapped his fingers impatiently. "Why so squeamish, all of a sudden? I was under the impression we wanted the same thing. Besides. Nothing I did to him was beyond his ability to repair."

"Nothing physical, no."

There was space of silence, into which seeped the thump and crash of the music from the dance floor. "I think, *douce* Janette, " said LaCroix, "that you will need to explain yourself."

She could not look away. The thoughts she hid from everyone else, even Nicola, he rummaged through with a casual expertise that seemed to bore him. When he was finished, she reached for her glass and tossed the blood and wine to the back of her throat.

Her hands were hurting again.

"So," LaCroix said, very softly. His finger reached out to touch her throat. "I never thought ... perhaps there is hope for him after all." He hitched himself onto the corner of the desk and contemplated his gloved hands. "Fascinating, that he doesn't remember. Although it does render the whole exercise a trifle academic. It would appear that I shall have to start all over again."

Her face felt as stiff as wax. "It would be a great mistake, to hurt his little mortal friend. Or the lamentable Schanke."

He gave no sign that he'd heard her.

She said, "Better for all of us to let this muddy pond settle."

At length he stood. "I think, perhaps ... a change of tactics is required." He tapped a forefinger against his lips. His gaze was introspective, his expression suspended. "Yes. A change in tactics."

She watched the thoughts chase across his face, and was at a loss to follow even one. Foreboding closed her throat.

"What are you thinking, LaCroix?" she whispered.

He said nothing.

Her fingernails bit her pams. "What are you planning now?"

He smiled.

Fear savaged her. "Whatever it is, I'll have no part in it. I won't allow you to use me to hurt Nicola again."

He did not look at her.

"Are you listening to me? *LaCroix!* Do you hear me?"

His glance was fleeting. "I hear you," he said, mild as milk.

"I mean it."

"I know you do."

She had learned, oh, so long ago, that it was pointless to beg. She begged anyway. "Why can't you leave him be? He's happy. Deluded, but happy. We both know his dream can never be, but why can't you let him dream it? At least for a while? He will wake, soon enough."

"Oh yes," said LaCroix. "He certainly will." He leaned over the desk and kissed her on the lips, gently. Turned his head to look out of the window. "Dawn's coming," he said. "Time to fly."

Janette eyed the shattered glass on the carpet with something approaching resignation. It was the fourth broken window this month, one way or another. She stalked to the door and flung it open.

"Alma!"

"You rang?" Alma enquired, appearing from the bar.

"Clean up my office."

Alma knew better than to object. Allowing herself a pout, she turned on her heel in search of a dustpan and brush.

Janette threaded her way through the writhin bodies on the dance floor. Dawn was coming but still they danced, greedy for every last, precious moment of the dark.

"Hey, gorgeous," said a fledgling voice. A hand snared her elbow. She turned, ready to snarl him into grovelling apology, but the impulse died in her throat.

He was new. Young. Handsome. Uncomplicated.

"Come here often?" the fledgling asked. His eyes were green, his hair black. He had beautiful teeth.

"Not as often as I'd like," Janette purred, and snaked her arms about his neck. His throat was strong and white.

"Maybe I can do something about that?" he suggested.

"I certainly hope so," said Janette. Over his shoulder she caught her sound tech's eye, and made a whirling motion with one finger. The music escalated in volume and frenzy, its beat racing like a runner's heart. All about her the dancers groaned their ecstasy aloud, and flung their cold bodies about in a heat of passion.

Janette closed the fledgling's arms about her, and abandoned her mind to the music, her body to the dance. With luck, in the scant minutes left between the dark and the dawn, she would be able to forget.

Not for long. Never for long. But for a while.